



Disney

TWISTED-W UNDERLAND

The NOVEL

WRITTEN BY
JUN HIOKI

ORIGINAL CONCEPT
& ILLUSTRATIONS BY
YANA TOBOSO



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TWISTED-WONDERLAND
ROSE-RED TYRANT
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VIZ MEDIA



DISNEY TWISTED-WONDERLAND: ROSE RED TYRANT
THE NOVEL

VIZ MEDIA EDITION

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Ah, my dear, esteemed benefactor.
My proud, beautiful flower of evil.
You are truly the fairest one of all.

*Oh, magic mirror, thy wisdom I entreat.
Reveal unto me the visage that I seek ...*





Smoke snaked from the mountain of debris. Thick like rain clouds, it puffed upward to blanket the sky.

Fire had razed everything in the area, and anything that escaped the flames had been torn down by windstorms. Amid the wreckage, an iron window frame drooped, reminiscent of a withered plant stalk. Fissures cracked open the ground, and treetops still stretched outward. All traces of the building's former majesty were gone. The sight was so dreadful that it would have been easier to accept the idea that this had always been a wasteland, and that the time we'd spent there had been an illusion.

Ashes blew through the air. The wind swept up fragments of glass and pebbles that dug into my skin, prickling, stinging. I somehow managed to wrench my eyelids open, though they tried to stay shut to protect my eyes.

The first thing I saw was the blue flame. Burning up the dust and sending sparks scattering, the fire shimmered and licked the sky.

When I looked closely into the flames, I could see eyes blazing brightly. Protruding nostrils panting raggedly. Fangs as large as my face. Before my eyes was a beast so large I could tilt my head back until it ripped clean off and still not see the end of it.

The beast's hideous face twisted into a fearsome snarl as it howled, "Unngraaaaaah!"

Something moved in the corner of my eye. A person. And not just one. People in black robes dotted the scorched earth. Cowled hoods hid their

eyes, and they shouted desperately.

But I couldn't catch a word of it. The beast's jaw dropped, and its legs shook, unsteady once more. Neither could I hear the howl so loud and intense it shook the very earth itself.

More intense than any of that was the voice whispering intently in my mind.

The time left to me, to them, to you is short. You must not let go of that hand ...







“ ... !”

A hooded figure stretched a hand out toward him.

He had to take it. He knew this instinctively, without any conscious thought, but for some curious reason, he couldn't move.

The monster before him grinned.

“Myah ha!”

What was that sound? Yuya Kuroki suddenly felt like something was off.

“Myah ha ha! Myah ha! Ha! I better find that uniform before someone spots me.”

The voice sounded amused and a little inane. Someone was laughing and humming to themselves. The happy-go-lucky feel of it was draining just to listen to, and there was a weariness enveloping his entire body, like a soak in a lukewarm bath.

He wasn't the least bit on edge. *I feel like the total opposite of how I did a minute ago, he thought. I mean, that whole thing earlier was—huh? Wait. What whole thing?*

He could remember being frightened. Sad. But he couldn't really remember why or what had troubled him. Like a crumbling sandcastle, the more he tried to grab hold of the memory, the hazier the details became. In the time it took to blink, he'd forgotten all of it.

Well, that's how it is with dreams. Oh, huh. I guess this is a dream, too.

He heard the carefree voice again, much closer this time.

“Woh-kay, this is the one! This guy right here!”

If this is a dream, then I really wish you'd keep your voice down. I'm still pretty sleepy. And this place is so soft, warm, and comfortable, it's like I'm inside a giant hug or something. Just having his eyes closed gave him the ultimate sense of security. He'd never dozed like this before and was quite certain that he would have the best dreams of his life if he could just fall completely asleep.

As Yuya dozed and started to drift off, the world around him began to shake violently back and forth.

What is that?!

He opened his eyes and was surprised again, as he could see nothing—only darkness. A darkness so complete that his eyes did not adjust to it, even after a minute or two.

He didn't even know whether he was standing or sitting or lying down. He tried to shift but discovered he couldn't move the way he wanted to. If he bent his legs the tiniest bit, his knees bumped up against something. It was the same with his arms and head.

He was apparently locked up somewhere—and that somewhere was a very small space.

The gentle embrace changed into firm restraint. Fear rose up inside him, and his palms grew damp with sweat.

“Urgggh.” He heard the voice again. “This lid weighs a ton! Maybe I could smash it with something?”

Bang. Bang.

The shaking grew more violent, and his forehead slammed into something. Then the back of his head smashed into something, too, over and over. The repeated collisions were making him dizzy. What on earth was happening?

“No good, huh? Well, I ain't giving up so easy as that.”

Yuya held his breath. What terrible fate awaited him next?

“Try this on for size! Myah ha!”

He thrust his hands forward at the same time as the voice laughed. He had to get out of there right that second!

“Ow!” he cried out when something hard whacked him.

It was the ground. He felt queasy, like his brain was rolling around inside his skull. He pressed his hands to the cold stone beneath him and staggered to his feet.

“Where am I?” he wondered, and his voice echoed oddly. He had apparently fallen into a large space. He confirmed that he could move his arms and legs again, and felt a wave of relief wash over him.

His surroundings were so dimly lit that his eyes adjusted easily to the gloom, even though he had just come from a pitch-black place. Maybe it was already nighttime.

Yuya looked up and saw stars above him, just as he’d expected. But they were swinging wildly, strange somehow. When he looked harder, he realized they were not stars and the moon, but rather the components of a chandelier. Decorative drops shimmered like opals, illuminated by small candles. The light was rather subdued for how big the chandelier was. The candles looked like they would go out at the slightest breeze, and he felt anxious just looking at them.

He used the light they shed to examine his surroundings. He was standing in what appeared to be a narrow hallway, and though the gloom meant that he couldn’t tell what was ahead of him, there were black boxes on either side of him. Hundreds of them.

“Are these ... coffins?” he murmured.

The boxes were hexagonal with long sides tugged out a bit. They looked exactly like coffins. Silver keyholes adorned the polished black lids. He could tell just by looking at them that the boxes were heavy, and they were just big enough for a single person to fit inside, in line with their supposed purpose. They were lined up in rows, crammed in on either side of the hall.

Is this a graveyard? But then ... Yuya frowned, perplexed. All the coffins were bobbing up and down, as if they were having a truly great time. From a certain angle, it almost looked like they were dancing. He had no idea what the mechanism was, but if there *was something* inside of them, then the dancing was in pretty poor taste.

While he eyed the bobbing coffins dubiously, he noticed that the one next to him was different from all the others. It had no lid, and it was empty inside. The black fabric lining looked soft and sleek, but he absolutely could not bring himself to touch it. As he looked around, he spotted the lid on the ground at his feet.

Had he maybe just come out of this coffin?

He couldn't be certain, but the coffin's padded interior had a human-shaped indentation in it, as if someone had recently stepped out of it. From where he was standing and the general situation, it seemed only natural to assume that that someone was him. So why on earth had he been inside of a coffin?

He shuddered. What *was* this place? He wanted to believe that it wasn't a graveyard, but he'd never seen it before and didn't know the first thing about it.

Before this, he'd been ... Right. At school. Yuya massaged his temples to ease the ache in his head and thought back through hazy memories. He'd left the classroom right after Classics in sixth period. He had slipped past classmates heading off to practice and various extracurricular activities, and kept going, out the school gates to head right on home as usual. And then—

“Hey! You!” someone called out.

It was the same voice he'd heard in the darkness. He hurriedly scanned the area, but there was no one around.

“Do your eyes not work or what?” the voice snarled from below. “I'm right here!”

Yuya lowered his gaze. “A stuffed animal?” he wondered.

A gray plush toy was sitting before him. It was of a decent size, and if it were stood up on its back legs, it might have reached up past his knees—the perfect size for a child to hug with their whole body. It had a striking striped ribbon tied around its neck, so maybe it did belong to someone. The insides of its ears and eyes were blue and seemed to shine with a hazy light, while the patch of snowy-white fur on its chest was soft and fluffy.

What kind of animal was it supposed to be? He'd never seen a creature like this. Its face was too round to be a dog, and it was too short and stout to be a cat. Fumbling through the process of elimination, he figured it was probably ...

“A weasel?” he guessed.

“How *dare* you!” the stuffed animal yelled as it turned its eyes up at him. “I am no *weasel*! I'm Grim, sorcerer extraordinaire.” It looked like it was going to come flying at him at any second.

“Whoa! It talked?!” Yuya exclaimed as he jumped back. “Maybe it’s battery powered?”

If it were a mechanical toy, there would be a compartment somewhere on its backside, so Yuya reached out to pick the stuffed animal up to investigate, but it nimbly dodged him as the forked tip of its tail beat at the back of his hand. It was clearly moving with a will of its own.

“So it’s *not* a stuffed animal?” Yuya asked. He frowned, perplexed. “It’s ... alive? But how can a weasel be talking?!”

“Listen, you! I’m not a weasel. I am the mighty Grim,” the stuffed creature snapped, and then clicked his tongue. “Tch! And here I was gonna peel that thing off you while you were sleeping. Way to ruin my plan, human!” He held out his paw like a person, palm up, pink toe beans wriggling back and forth. “Well, whatever. Just gimme your uniform and be quick about it.”

“Uniform?” Cocking his head curiously to one side, Yuya looked down at himself and cried out in surprise. “What is *this*?!”

The last he knew, he’d been wearing his school uniform—white shirt, school crest embroidered on the chest pocket, black trousers—an extremely simple, utterly average school outfit.

And yet, he was now wrapped in a black robe, even though he had absolutely no recollection of getting changed. The sleeves were embroidered with a complex pattern in gold thread, and silky fabric hung from his belt, completely covering him down to his knees.

Reflexively, he lifted the hem and stared. The fabric was as soft as it looked; it practically melted in his hands. He’d been so focused on figuring out where he was that he hadn’t even noticed that the clothes he wore were not his own. Even his shoes were different.

“Why am I ...” he groaned. “When ...”

“Oh, come *on*. I don’t have time for this,” Grim snarled. “Hand it over already!”

“Whoa!” Yuya just barely managed to dodge as Grim lunged at him.

“Hnnngh.” The stuffed animal picked himself up off the ground. “You’re gonna regret this!”

“M-monster!” Yuya yelped, inching backward. “Are you trying to bite me?!”

He spotted a door by the stairs and bolted toward it.



A DARK HALLWAY. A long staircase. Unsettling green light. The paintings on the walls spoke to him.

“Go right if you want to get out of here.”

“No, no, go left.”

Where *was* he? Why were the paintings talking? Yuya was almost in tears as he stumbled through the unfamiliar building, but no matter how far he ran or where he hid, Grim was able to sniff him out.

There were any number of doors lining the corridor, and Yuya desperately yanked at each of them, but not one would open for him. There appeared to be no one else in the entire building save for him and the creature, Grim.

The hallway steadily grew narrower and more complicated until, at last, he found himself trapped in a dead end. Through the dusty glass of a small window there, he could see the moon looming so large it seemed fake, but at least this appeared to be the actual sky and not another chandelier.

When he looked down, he saw another moon shimmering there, and he realized it was a reflection of the moon off water, which meant there was a river or ocean or *something* below him. But it was unclear how deep or how far away it was, and Yuya did not have the courage to break the window and jump out into it.

“Heh heh heh!” Grim laughed maliciously. “That’s it, nice and quiet now!”

“Stay away from me!” Yuya yelled, shuddering in fear. The neat row of teeth in Grim’s open mouth looked razor sharp, like they could easily take a chunk out of him.

Grim inched closer, his tail flicking back and forth. “Now unless you wanna get burned to a crisp, take off that—”

“Ah! I’ve found you at last!” a voice from behind Grim interrupted. “Splendid. But really, you mustn’t go wandering off on your own like that.”

Grim whirled around, and Yuya looked up with a startled gasp. “Huh?!”

A man in a curious outfit stood before him in the hallway. The top hat perched on his head and the long coat that hung from his shoulders exaggerated his height and drew the eye. He carried an imposing cane shaped like a key. More conspicuous, however, was the black mask he wore over his pale face, covering his forehead and reaching down below his glittering golden eyes. The mask’s nose was sharply pointed, like a bird’s beak.

“Imagine my surprise when I entered the Mirror Chamber and discovered one of the gates was open!” the man mused languidly. “I looked inside and found nothing but an empty shell. To think that you would open your own gate and step out before I could unlock it! Truly unprecedented. However did you manage it?”

“Please help me!” Yuya cried in response. “I’m being attacked by a monster!”

“You think you can stop me or something?” Grim growled as he turned toward the man. “You’ve got some nerve. I can take both of you, easy—”

Snap!

An inky shadow shot through the air.

“Whaaa?!” Grim yelped as a length of black fabric twisted itself around him and bound his arms to his sides in the blink of an eye. The fabric stretched and shrank eerily, as if it were alive. “Me-yeow! What’s with the sash?”

“It is not a sash. Consider it tough love.” The masked man turned the tip of the cane in his hand toward the stuffed animal monster. “You were about to use magic there, weren’t you? Well, I simply cannot have you running around willy-nilly in this confined space.”

“Woh-kay, you asked for it—mmmph!”

“And there you go, trying to cast your magic again,” the man said coolly as Grim flopped around like a fish out of water at his feet, black fabric covering his mouth now, too. “I really must insist you do not.”

Each time the man waved his key-shaped cane, his “tough love” sash tightened around Grim. The weasel wizard looked like a frog being eaten by a large snake.

As Yuya stared, in a daze, the man turned to him. “Dear me. Yours is quite the poorly trained familiar. School rules do not permit untamed monster companions.”

“Familiar?” Yuya parroted.

The man shook his head, exasperated. “Not only do you go and open your gate, but you also leave the Mirror Chamber, immediately summon a familiar, and go exploring the school. Honestly. You are *much* more daring than your appearance would suggest.”

“Um. I-I don’t understand,” Yuya stammered. “Where am I?”

“The top floor of the eastern wing,” the man replied immediately. “The very farthest out from the school, currently used for storage.”

Yuya couldn’t get a handle on any of this. “School?”

The man nodded as if this were natural and obvious, and tucked Grim under his arm. He seemed entirely unbothered by Grim’s desperate struggling. “Your orientation has already begun. Come now. Let’s hurry back to the Mirror Chamber.”

“My ... orientation?” Yuya stared at him blankly.

“Yes.” The man nodded again. “The academy’s traditional orientation. I’m certain you’ve been looking forward to it.” When Yuya said nothing, the man frowned and gave him a curious look. After a moment’s silence, he asked, “Do you actually not know what is happening?”

“I do not! That is exactly the thing.” Yuya was immensely relieved to have someone finally understand what he was going through. From the moment he opened his eyes, he’d been surrounded by unsettling weirdness, as if he were trapped in some kind of nightmare. The floodgates opened, and all the questions that had been building up poured out: “Where am I? What was that coffin? What is this creature? How did I get here?”

“Hmm.” The man smiled placidly despite the abrupt interrogation. “The timespace teleportation must have addled your memories. Well, these

things happen, I suppose. No need to worry. I shall explain it to you while we walk. Truly, my magnanimity is boundless!”

The man extended a graceful arm to the bewildered Yuya, like a bird spreading its wings, although Grim continued to struggle and flail under his other arm.

Fwssht!

Flames sparked to life on the candles affixed to the walls. A string of light raced down each side of the hallway, like an invisible runner with a match that was setting flame to the candles. At once, the darkness receded to the corners.

“This is Night Raven College,” the man announced with a dramatic flourish. “The most prestigious arcane academy in all of Twisted Wonderland, for students the world over who demonstrate a rare aptitude for magic. I am Dire Crowley. Having been entrusted with its care by the chairperson, I serve as headmage.”

Oh, I get it. This isn’t like a nightmare. I’m actually still dreaming, Yuya thought absently as he looked at the smiling man before him. This was a dream. It was absolutely, without a doubt, a dream. After all, Dire Crowley’s words were too impossible, too unreal.

“You stand among their ranks,” Crowley continued. “As a fledgling sorcerer and new student at our college.”



Yuya was walking home from school alone when he was forced to stop by a light that was almost never red. It had been almost six months since he had started high school, but this was the first time he’d ever been stopped at this crosswalk, despite coming this same way twice a day, every day. It was a narrow road that bicycles rarely traveled, much less cars. He remembered thinking it was weird.

The light finally turned green, and he’d just taken a step forward when he heard a strange sound.

“What’s that?” He frowned and looked around. “Feels like it’s getting louder, too.”

“Brrrrrrrrr!”

It sounded like someone blowing air through closed lips.

He had no memory of anything after that.



“That was the carriage coming to pick you up,” Crowley said casually after hearing Yuya’s story. “All of the students at Night Raven College go through gates and are brought here in horse-drawn carriages. To this day, we continue our college’s time-honored tradition of sending a carriage to meet students.” He looked back at Yuya. “How do you like that? Pretty impressive, yes? You’d expect nothing less from such a prestigious school, hm?”

Yuya had a million questions, but given that this was a dream, there was no point in getting too worked up about the details.

So he merely asked, “What’s a gate?”

“The gate that you came out of” was the answer he got.

“That coffin was the gate?!” he cried.

“Yes.” Crowley nodded, firmly. “You come to the school and are reborn a magnificent mage. Quite the fitting concept for youths brimming with such hope, yes?”

“Mmffff!” Grim glared at Yuya with resentful eyes from where he was pinned beneath Crowley’s arm.

Yuya pretended not to notice this as he trailed after Crowley, choosing to go with the flow.

He’d apparently come quite a ways in his attempt at escape. They went down any number of staircases before finally arriving at a door he recognized.

“Now then.” Crowley turned to look at him. “We have returned to the Mirror Chamber. Finding you was quite the trial indeed, so I imagine the orientation’s already reached dorm assignments right about now—” He broke off abruptly.

Yuya looked up to see that Crowley’s pale lips were pulled up into a grin.

“Aah, this should be fun, hm!” he cried.

“Sorry?” Yuya stared at him, brow furrowed.

“I’m simply *dying* to know which dorm will be chosen for you!” The man in the mask clasped his hands together with glee. “You are truly a breath of fresh air, opening your gate all by yourself and breaking the student mold. One does naturally harbor certain expectations.”

“Uh, expectations?” Yuya gaped. “Hang on just a second. I—”

“Students!” Crowley said, voice projecting outward as the door swung open forcefully, even though he had not so much as laid a finger on it. “I’ve brought your new star, the talk of our little town! Our freshest cohort is together at last.”

People. So. Many. People.

They were back in the room where Yuya had first woken up, but instead of the rows of coffins, there were now rows of individuals. Hundreds of them. And all their eyes turned toward Yuya as he stepped into the room. A heartbeat before he could turn and run, the door closed with a *klak*.

“Ah ...” Yuya gasped.

The pillars shone with a warm light, making the room much brighter than it had been when he’d first seen it. Everyone gathered within it was wearing the same shadowy robe as Yuya, wrapped in the same inky black from the tops of their heads to the tips of their toes.

But despite being dressed uniformly, one group in particular drew his eye. They were sitting in an open area toward the back of the corridor, facing the countless others.

“Oh, headmage! You’re finally here,” called a boy with white hair adorned with a decorative headband. “We’re done with the dorm assignments. We were just talking about what we should do now. You were so late, I thought maybe you had a tummy ache.” He laughed, cheerily.

Yuya felt a flicker of relief at the boy’s bright demeanor.

“This the new kid who opened the gate all by himself? Ha!” a tall, muscular boy snorted. “I mean, I have my doubts.” Ears poking out from long, shiny dark hair twitched. They were animal ears.

Unconsciously, Yuya stared, and received a glare in return that turned his blood to ice, so he hurriedly looked away. The sharp light in the other boy’s eyes was reminiscent of a large carnivore.

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. How’d you do it? Brute force? Or maybe magic?” asked a person with golden hair that was pulled back, as he turned challenging eyes on Yuya. This individual was captivating and gorgeous, and Yuya wouldn’t have been surprised about any gender they turned out to be. Their beauty was so astonishing that Yuya would have accepted without question that they were not even human, but rather a magical creature.



“If it was magic, then you’ve got quite the power. We’d love to have you in our dorm,” a boy with silver hair said to Yuya, a gentle smile crossing his lips. The smile itself was kind, but the narrowed eyes behind his glasses shone with a cool intellect. Every move he made was economical, as if he’d calculated the trajectory of his motions down to the last finger twitch.

“Right from orientation, all eyes in the school are on you? Maybe you’ve been reading a bit too much *Cautious Hero* or some other light novel?” A tablet floating amid the hooded students flashed. Apparently, this was the source of the voice, which spoke with a rumbling pitch that felt like crawling through the depths of the earth. The words came too quickly for Yuya to catch them all, but the tone gave him the impression that the tablet was not particularly interested in speaking with anyone anyway.

“It’s already half an hour past the scheduled end of the orientation,” a boy with red hair announced flatly. “We should assign him a dorm immediately, in line with regulations.” His voice was unshakably firm; he clearly was not about to allow any further waste of time.

The students whispering about Yuya instantly fell silent, but their words lingered in his ears, whether he liked it or not.

“Coming in late with the headmage? Is he seriously that great a mage?”

“Huh. This guy’s really going all in right from orientation.”

“Mm-hmm. Pret-ty innnn-teresting.”

“Some nerve for a mere human!”

Everyone there was keenly interested in Yuya in one way or another and was clearly expecting great things from him.

“No! I’m ... I’m just a guy!” he cried desperately, as if to wake himself from this nightmare. All his outburst did was make people look at him again, and the pressure of those countless pairs of eyes was almost enough to crush him to dust.

He tried to step away, to retreat, but Crowley gave him a hearty push. He looked over his shoulder and frantically shook his head, but Crowley forced his heavy feet forward, farther into the corridor.

“Now then, everyone’s waiting!” he said briskly. “Step up to the Dark Mirror and be quick about it.”

“The Dark Mirror?” Yuya furrowed his brow and then swallowed the question on the tip of his tongue because the answer was immediately obvious.

A large, round mirror was enshrined in the corridor ahead, looking magnificent with a shiny gold frame. A crown sat on its peak, and below it, twisting snakes were carved into the frame, encircling the glass. Just like the first “gate” Yuya had seen, the mirror was hanging in the air, suspended by nothing.

Urged on by Crowley, he peered into the glass, and a boy with short black hair appeared on its surface. Eyebrows, nose, mouth, ears—all were utterly average. Not one thing distinguished the boy in any way.

If pressed to highlight a notable feature, Yuya would have said that the boy’s eyes were perhaps a bit rounder than average, but even this did not conflict with his other features. The roundness of his eyes blended in with the rest so well that it would have been forgotten the second anyone looking at this face glanced away from it.

Put nicely, the face had a comfortable familiarity to it. Put not so nicely, it was mediocre—a sort of everyman’s face, which, if encountered in the morning, would be forgotten by evening. It was the face Yuya saw in the mirror every day. What was the point of making him look at it now?

He had just opened his mouth to ask Crowley this question when the mirror abruptly flashed, and green flames filled the glass. Reflexively, he looked over his shoulder. There was nothing there. The fire was only inside the mirror.

As if to quench that fire, a haunting face appeared in the center of the mirror. Yuya couldn’t tell if it was a mask, a doll, or an actual person. It was just a face.

He gaped in amazement as he realized the mirror was showing someone other than himself. And then that someone spoke in a deep, masculine voice.

“State your name,” the mirror commanded.

“My ... ? Oh. Uh, Yuya Kuroki,” Yuya stammered.

“Yuya Kuroki.”

He felt a tickle deep down inside. It was a curious sensation, like someone was tugging on the inside of his ribs.

The man in the mirror had no eyeballs, only eye sockets gaping emptily. Yuya couldn't tell what he was focused on and had the distinct sensation that the man was looking at all of him—into the deepest depths of his mind, leaving no stone unturned.

The mirror said, "The nature of your soul is—"

"Me-yeow!"

A cry interrupted the man in the mirror. Yuya looked back to see Grim break free from where he was held under Crowley's arm.

"Aah! There he goes," Crowley sighed. "I was too focused on the dorm assignment."

"If you thought you could keep me outta the game, you got another thing coming!" Grim spun around neatly in the air and dropped to the ground. Standing tall on two feet, he threw his head back.

"Myaaaahhh!" he cried, and a sea of flame spread out before him. Grim was shooting fire from his mouth!

As he kept exhaling for a seemingly impossible length of time given the size of his small body, the corridor instantly became a raging inferno, the flames the same pale color as Grim's eyes and exuding a dazzling heat.

Yuya automatically covered his face with his arms.

It's so hot.

It was fire. Of course it would be hot to the touch; of course it would burn.

This sent a shock through Yuya. *This isn't a dream!* he realized, abruptly.

"So you're trying to steal my thunder and get all the glory, huh? Well, you're waaaay outta your league, buddy!" Grim crowed. Before Yuya knew it, he was alone with Grim in the middle of a small circle of flames. "You'll have to fight me for it!"

"Fight?" Yuya asked as he stared blankly at the animal. "Me?!"

"Yup." Grim nodded, firmly. "My plan was to switch places with you while all them dodos were sleeping. And then you went and ran off on me! But if I take you down, they'll see that I'm the one with the real power. *And* there'll be an opening for a new student." His large mouth arched upward, his fangs glittering. "That seat's as good as mine! Myah ha ha! I'm a genius!"

“We don’t have to fight for it,” Yuya said, nearly in tears, holding out both hands as if offering Grim a silver platter with his school enrollment on it. “You can totally have my spot. I don’t even know what’s going on here!”

But Grim paid him absolutely no mind and drew another deep breath, filling his stomach.

Yuya turned and tried to run, only to feel a burst of heat scorch his back.

“If you won’t play,” Grim snapped, “then I’ll get this game started!”

“Wait,” Yuya pleaded. “Stop. Don’t! I surrender!”

“Here we go!”

“Don’t—” Yuya squeezed his eyes shut.

Snap!

He heard the air crack around him, and then everything went quiet. Even the roar of the flames had faded to nothing.

Ever so timidly, Yuya opened his eyes to find the fire frozen around him, crystallized in its attempt to devour his surroundings, almost as if they had been forgotten by time. Tiny sparks became shards of ice and tumbled to the ground.

“Both of you,” said a male voice. *Crunch, crunch.* He heard the sound of feet stepping on the ice, moving toward him. “You seem to think you can do whatever you please here.”

The redheaded boy appeared in front of Yuya from between two chunks of ice. He was the one who’d been annoyed by their late entrance earlier. Yuya had thought he was the taller one at first glance, but now his small physique dominated the entire room. His presence was threatening, the look on his face frightening in its anger.

“I will tolerate no more of this nonsense,” the boy declared, his voice entirely devoid of emotion.

Yuya cowered in abject fear, but Grim was either stupider or braver, and he returned the boy’s glare with utmost confidence.

“Hnngrh,” Grim growled. “Another someone getting in my way.”

A large ice pillar stood where Grim had been only moments earlier. He raced up it leisurely on all four paws and laughed from up high. “Listen up! I’m gonna knock all of you flying with my magic extraordinaire!” he shouted. “So you better—”

“Are you ready for your sentence?” the boy asked.

“Huh?” Yuya frowned and looked at the boy. Something strange was happening. Grim also seemed to have guessed that something was off. Like Yuya, he stared at the boy with one hand in the air.

“Sentence first! Verdict afterward.”

Incredible power. Yes, power. Not heat, cold, light, or wind. This was the only way Yuya could describe the overwhelming force that swirled like a vortex around the redheaded boy.

Yuya simply stood there, rooted to the spot. He didn’t try to run away—not because he thought he was any match for this force, but rather because he didn’t know what else to do in the face of this enormous amount of energy. He felt like the nearly visible power might explode if he so much as moved a muscle. He was so frightened he could hardly stand it.

The redheaded boy’s arm dropped down toward Grim.

“Off with Your Head!” the boy shouted.

An arrow of light shot out at Grim. There was a brief flash, then the arrow transformed into a large red-and-black shackle. The second the open end touched Grim’s neck, it snapped shut with a heavy *clank*.

“What in the ...” Grim shook his head, but the shackle held fast. “You’re supposed to be all tough, but your magic’s a flop. Don’t even try’n collar me. I’ll burn it right off!”

Yuya managed to cover his face with his hands this time, but all he heard was a faint wheeze.

“H-huh?” Yuya wondered as he timidly opened his eyes and saw Grim blowing on his own hands, baffled.

“Myah?! What gives?” Grim scowled. “My fire ain’t workin’!”

“Ah, good show as always, Riddle!” said the boy with the glasses as he applauded from where he stood on the opposite side of the ice.

The rest of the students were all looking at them, too. They seemed like they were not so much simply watching what happened, but rather appreciating the artistry.

The boy with the glasses laughed cheerily, paying little mind to Grim. “Your signature spell locks down any magic,” he said to the redheaded boy. “It’s really quite handy, isn’t it? I’ve just *got* to have it—ah, I mean, I’ve just got to have respect for it.”

“Locks down magic?!” Grim yelped.

“Exactly,” the redheaded boy, Riddle, said as he grabbed Grim by the scruff of his neck and lifted him up. “Until I deign to remove that collar, you won’t be using any magic.”

Yuya noticed several pillars of ice neatly arranged around Grim, blocking any escape route. They must have deliberately missed Grim with the earlier ice-magic attack to guide him to this dead end and render him unable to use magic.

Grim kicked and flailed against his sad shackle.

“It’s no use,” Riddle told him. “You’re naught but a pet cat now.”

“Meowhat?!” Grim snarled. “I ain’t nobody’s pet *nothing!*”

“Oh, you’ve nothing to worry about there. I certainly have no interest in having such a rude and violent pet. Unlike a certain someone, I am no fool.” Riddle glared at Yuya, who was watching the argument with a pale face. “You!”

“What?!” Yuya replied, his voice a little too loud and forceful.

“You really make a mess of things, hm?” Riddle said, his voice far too powerful for the slender frame it came from. “First, you march into the orientation late with your head held high, and then you nearly set the Mirror Chamber on fire!” Overwhelmed, Yuya flinched and shrank as the redheaded boy continued to press him. “First of all, and above all else, this is a violation of the Queen of Hearts’ rules! You *must* know Rule 23.”

“H-hearts?” Yuya stammered. “Uhhh, rules?”

“Your ignorance is honestly stupefying,” Riddle told him. “Do you really not know the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 23—‘One must never bring a cat to a formal affair’?”

“N-no.” Yuya shook his head, quickly.

“Incredible! Have you ever cracked a book open in your life?”

“I’m sorry!”

Riddle’s expression alone was enough to make anyone looking upon him shake in their boots. An almost murderous rage colored his face, a blue vein throbbing violently on his forehead. Yuya had serious doubts about his chances for survival if he said this was his first time hearing of any such rule.

Instead, he bowed until he was nearly prostrate on the ground.

“I assume you were attempting to flaunt your magical abilities through the use of your familiar, but this is strictly prohibited,” Riddle said coldly.

“It seems as though I will have to personally make you aware of the rules of this academy if we ever manage to finish this orientation.”

He whirled around resolutely like a robot, his robe flapping behind him.

“I will tell you this. It matters not a whit to me which dorm is selected for you. Given that you’ve broken the Queen of Hearts’ rules, I must carry out my duty as the housewarden of Heartslabyul.”

Riddle’s footsteps echoed as he crossed the Mirror Chamber. As he approached the door, still holding Grim up, several other boys raced over to him.

“Hey!” Grim yelled. “What are you going to do to me?!”

“I’m not going to do anything to you,” Riddle sniffed. “I’m throwing you out. That collar will be removed after a period of time. If you can’t behave yourself, then it’s back to your nest with you.”

Riddle thrust Grim out at the students gathered around them. They bent at the knee and accepted the squirming bundle of fur. All of their faces were marked with painted symbols—diamonds, clubs, spades, hearts.

“You lot. Remove this insolent fellow from campus,” Riddle demanded.

“Yes, Housewarden!” they chorused as one.

“Curses! Curse you! Don’t think you’ve seen the last of me!” Grim protested desperately, no magic coming from his mouth as he was yanked up by both of his arms. “You fools better remember my name! ’Cause I’m gonna go down in the annals of magic history! Just you wait!”

The door closed, cutting his shouts short. In that last moment, his eyes were full of regret.

Watching from a safe distance, Yuya thought Grim looked like a captured weasel and felt a little sorry for him, but there was nothing he could do now. Not to mention that it seemed like Yuya would do better to concern himself with his own situation. Suddenly, something was pushed up against his chin, and he choked. There was a flash of red in the corner of his eye.

“The decision of which dorm you belong to will reveal to us your true nature. Now then. Let’s have you show us this great power of yours.” Riddle smiled deliberately with his mouth alone, the smile not reaching his eyes, and Yuya understood that this was a challenge.

Although Riddle moved with an adult calm, Yuya guessed they were basically the same age. His still plump cheeks were flushed, and he exuded

energy and confidence. His pride as a powerful fighter was written all over his body; he would not flinch in the face of any opponent, no matter how strong.

“Do it!” Riddle snapped.

“Right!” Yuya answered as he turned toward the Dark Mirror, and the man appeared once again. He acknowledged Yuya standing before him and spoke the same words he had before.

“Yuya Kuroki. The nature of your soul is ...”

Gulp.

He heard the sound of someone swallowing hard from nowhere in particular and realized the sound hadn’t come from just one person; everyone assembled before the Dark Mirror had gasped, waiting with bated breath for the Dark Mirror to continue.

Their interest, expectation, envy. All of it danced on Yuya’s nerves and weighed him down. He clenched shaking hands into fists. He had only one wish.

Please. Please. Nothing happen, please!

He didn’t know whether his prayer was heard. The Dark Mirror spoke again.

“ ... unclear to me.”

“What?” asked Riddle as his eyes grew round in surprise.

“Er?” Next to him, Crowley was equally surprised. “Dark Mirror, what did you just say?” he queried.

“I sense no magical power in this one. Soundless. Colorless. Shapeless. Utterly vacant,” the mirror continued. The chatter in the Mirror Chamber gradually grew louder. *“Therefore, no dorm would be appropriate.”*

“No dorm?!” Crowley cried.

The students standing around looked at each other.

Yuya could hear quiet laughter among the murmuring voices. When he turned around, the group of boys who’d spoken to Crowley when he and Yuya entered the Mirror Chamber were snickering at each other.

“Well, well!” The boy with silver hair pushed up his glasses and said to the boy with the golden hair next to him, “This is quite the disappointment, hm?”

“So who was it who first said we got this amazingly powerful student this year?” the boy with the golden hair demanded.

“The headmage,” the silver-haired boy responded. “There’s a recording of the whole thing in the log. Definitely him.”

The tablet flashed and a video played showing Crowley declaring, “*All of which is to say, our very special new student stepped out on his own. I shall now go and seek him out. This is very exciting, everyone!*” The screen showed Crowley exiting the Mirror Chamber.

When all the students in the school glared at the headmage, he hurriedly waved his hands in defensive protest. “It’s simply not possible for the black carriage to receive a human being who cannot use magic,” he insisted. “From my understanding, the student selection process has not erred once in its century of existence!”

“Well, don’t get too down about it,” the boy with white hair said, trying to cheer Crowley up. “There’s a first time for everything.”

“I’m telling you, that is absurd!” Crowley looked to Yuya for salvation. “Wait. You brought along that familiar, did you not? You *must* have magic, then!”

“Familiar?” Yuya repeated. “Do you mean that creature Grim?”

“Yes!”

“I didn’t bring him with me,” he said, hurriedly shaking his head from side to side. He’d already told Crowley this a million times. “He was there when I woke up. I’ve never seen that creature in my life.”

“Oh. Is that so?” Crowley frowned. “You really should’ve said so sooner.”

Yuya held his tongue, although he dearly wanted to snap that Crowley had simply gone ahead and assumed that Grim was his familiar. But the disappointment in the room came through loud and clear in everyone’s eyes and sighs.

He just wanted to make it out of this experience in one piece. All he could do was hang his head and apologize.

Riddle snorted in laughter. “The mess you’ve made of the orientation is truly unforgivable, but ... I take back what I said earlier. I have no intention of scolding you any further. You’re an outsider, after all.”

Riddle looked deflated somehow, or maybe he was the slightest bit sympathetic toward Yuya. Either way, he immediately turned his gaze on Crowley, so Yuya couldn’t tell what he was really thinking.

“Headmage, may we please return to the dorms?” Riddle asked. “We have the new student tour—aah, we’re already twenty minutes late!”

“Oh! Y-yes. Right. How about you go and do that!” Crowley clapped his hands together as if this were a most welcome change of subject. “I hereby declare that orientation has concluded. Housewardens, please escort your students back to the dorms.”

The ones who moved at the word “housewardens” were the boys who had first spoken up when Crowley and Yuya had arrived at the Mirror Chamber. Some held their heads high, and others moved lazily; whatever their reaction to Crowley’s command, the new students all followed their direction. These housewardens were clearly leaders of some kind.

Although most of the students followed the housewardens’ instructions and automatically grouped together, some looked around anxiously, searching the room with perplexed looks.

Noticing this, Crowley cocked his head to one side and asked, “Hm? Where is Malleus Draconia? I don’t see him anywhere.”

The housewardens blinked.

“Now that you mention it ...” The boy with animal ears laughed. “I *knew* I was feeling good for some reason. So that little lizard’s not here.”

“We forgot to invite him again,” the boy with the golden hair sighed. But rather than appearing frustrated or annoyed, he merely shrugged his shoulders, so Yuya couldn’t really tell how serious he was.

It seemed that only the boy with the white hair was actually concerned. His eyebrows pulled together into a Vee as he scratched his head and said, “Again? Poor Malleus, we did him wrong.”

“Honestly. You only *just* realized he’s not here?” a small-statured boy asked in a deep voice as he appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

“Gah!” Crowley jumped in surprise. “Vanrouge! Where did you come from?”

“As before, there was no official notice about the orientation. I went out to look for him in a hurry there, but I couldn’t find him yet again.” With his vivid pink hair tucked into his hood and wide, almost tearful eyes that were red like raspberries, this Vanrouge boy was as striking as any of the housewardens.

“Keh heh heh!” Vanrouge laughed. “Aah, poor Malleus. I just hope he’s not angry.”

“Sorry,” the boy with the white hair said. “We weren’t trying to leave Malleus out or anything.”

“He’s the problem here, though,” the boy with the golden hair interjected. “I mean, he’s not exactly the easiest person to talk to.”

“Keh heh heh. Don’t say that!” Vanrouge replied. “We’re all school chums, aren’t we? Don’t overthink it. Just be friends with him.”

The white-haired boy nodded firmly, while the beautiful golden-haired boy shook his head in exasperation. The other students looked around nervously.

Vanrouge winked playfully. “Well, not to worry, new students! In the place of housewarden Malleus Draconia, I will lead you to the Diasomnia Dorm as the deputy housewarden.”

The room burst into excited whispers.

“So the housewarden for Diasomnia is *the* Malleus Draconia.”

“It’s true? He really does go to Night Raven College?”

“Yikes. I totally don’t want to run into that guy.”

Yuya figured this Malleus Draconia person must be famous if the sound of his name alone inspired this much fear.

The boy with the animal ears clicked his tongue. “I should’ve gone home to bed instead of wasting time at this orientation.” He waved a hand. “Savanaclaw students! Follow me.”

“Children,” the tablet said, sounding deeply annoyed, “I’ll send the campus map to your phones. Find your way to the dorm.” The light disappeared from its screen.

The other boys in the room called out to one another and chatted as they sorted themselves out. Amid the commotion, Yuya heard Riddle’s clear voice call out, “Heartslabyul Dorm students. Right face! *Right!* First step with your left foot. Line up behind the deputy housewarden!”

Their earlier enthusiasm fizzling out, the students neatly turned their backs on Yuya and marched out of the Mirror Chamber on quick feet, leaving only Yuya, Crowley, and the Dark Mirror in silence.

“Aaah.” It was Crowley who broke the silence. “I am sorry about all that.”

“Oh!” Yuya said. “No. I’m sorry I couldn’t be what you were hoping for.”

It was Crowley who had simply assumed he was a new student and pushed his expectations on a reluctant Yuya. This whole fracas was something that Yuya had been dragged into against his will, and yet in the face of Crowley's obvious and utter disappointment, Yuya felt the urge to run away, as if he himself was somehow to blame.

"Haah," Crowley sighed, clearly disheartened. Yuya couldn't help but wonder how he was able to express such emotion when the majority of his face was covered by that mask. "I thought we might finally be *successful* this year if an impressive new student to rival Draconia were to arrive at the school."

"Um. I don't really understand?" Yuya said timidly, in a desperate effort to keep from discouraging Crowley further.

Perhaps Crowley felt better after wallowing in his emotions for a moment. "I suppose not," he said, and cleared his throat. "Let us turn our minds to other considerations then."

Yeah, let's, Yuya thought to himself. *I'll be in real trouble here otherwise.* They were finally getting to what actually mattered to him.

"So then. Um," he said. "What should I do here?"

"Mm-hmm." Crowley pressed a finger to his chin. "This is a most unfortunate turn of events. You do understand that I cannot very well admit a student with no magical ability to my academy. But worry not! It does seem that this was an error on our part, so we will use the power of the Dark Mirror to return you to your home immediately. This was quite the catastrophe, hm?"

He turned toward the Dark Mirror and raised his arms. Lazy flames erupted in the mirror, and a man rose up in the center once more.

"Now then. O Dark Mirror! Return this soul to where it belongs!" Crowley commanded.

At last, he would be able to go home, Yuya told himself with a sigh of relief. Then he heard the mirror's words echo in his mind.

"There is no such place."

What? Yuya thought, startled.

"There is no place in the world where this soul belongs."

"What did you say?" Crowley asked as Yuya stood, speechless. "That's not possible! Wait. Didn't I say that earlier as well? My, but today is a veritable cavalcade of impossible phenomena!"

Crowley repeated his command, but no matter how many times he demanded the mirror return Yuya to his home, the mirror's response was the same.

Nowhere.

There was no place for Yuya to go home to. That was the only thing the man in the mirror would say.

"It doesn't know where he belongs, so it can't send him there." Crowley sighed at such length that clouds appeared on the mirror's glass. "Er. What was your name?"

"Yuya Kuroki," Yuya replied, promptly.

"Yua?" Crowley frowned. "Yuwa?"

Yuya said his name again, but apparently it was too difficult for Crowley to replicate.

"What an odd name," he said, finally. "It's a bit hard to pronounce. Do you mind if I call you 'Yu'?"

Yuya nodded his agreement, and the headmage grew thoughtful.

"Tell me, Yu," he said. "From what land do you hail?"

"I'm from Nihon," Yuya told him.

"Ni-kan?"

"Umm. Ja-p-an." Yuya tried the English name of his country, but that apparently did not click for Crowley either.

"Ja-pan?" The lines on Crowley's forehead grew even more pronounced.

Yuya had been speaking Japanese this whole time, and no one had had any trouble understanding him up until this point, so there really was no point in trying with English—but wait. Was he *really* speaking Japanese?

The words were leaving his mouth without any extra thought, and he wasn't having any issue understanding what anyone else said, but when he thought about it, he did feel like something was slightly off. The words he was thinking and the movements of his own mouth didn't match.

"I am ..." His mouth was opening and closing more often than required to say just those words, but the words still sounded the way they always did when they reached his ears. He thought he was speaking the language he knew, and somehow, his ears and his mouth were naturally translating into a language he didn't know. He frowned in consternation.

"I am intimately acquainted with the origins of the students who come to Night Raven College from all over the world," Crowley declared. "But I

am not familiar with this ‘Nikan’ or ‘Japan’ or what have you that you speak of. This is perhaps ...” He hesitated as he pressed a hand to his forehead. “You may very well have come here from another world.”

“Another world,” Yuya parroted in disbelief.

Crowley nodded, his face deadly serious. Despite Crowley sounding like he was telling a story straight from the pages of a manga or novel, Yuya found himself nodding at these astounding words.

The moment he’d seen magic, the second he’d seen Grim, maybe even from the moment he’d opened his eyes for the first time in this room, he’d had a feeling that he wasn’t in Japan. Or even on Earth.

This was a different world. At some point, he had emerged into a world called Twisted Wonderland, where magic was a matter of course.

“B-but!” he cried. “But how would I ... ?”

Crowley shook his head to say that he didn’t know the reason himself. “To think that the Dark Mirror would call up a student from another world ... I’ve never heard of such a thing. I would like to know more if possible. Do you have any personal items that would allow me a greater understanding of you or the world you came from, Yu?”

“Greater understanding?” Yuya asked.

“Yes.” Crowley nodded. “A driver’s license, for instance.”

“When I woke up, I was already in the gate. I was carrying a bag, but it disappeared with my clothes. I had my student ID in my wallet, but—” Yuya patted himself down, frantically. “My phone! I had my smartphone in my pocket, but it’s gone now, too.”

“Incredible!” Crowley cried, eyes widening. “So you have smartphones in your parallel world, as well.”

“I am also ... surprised by this,” Yuya said cautiously. *The first thing you ask about is a driver’s license?* He had assumed they’d have more fantastical things in this world, given the magic it contained.

“Hmm.” Crowley looked off into the distance thoughtfully. “All of which is to say you have no personal effects on you. This is a predicament.”

Yuya really did have nothing, but when Crowley pointed it out, he felt cut adrift all over again. How was he supposed to live in a world where he didn’t have even a single shoe to his name?

It seemed that Crowley was also at a loss. “It doesn’t appear that we will come up with a solution to your situation anytime soon, no matter how we might rack our brains. At any rate, you can stay at Night Raven College for tonight.”

“You’ll let me stay the night?!” Yuya cried, a surge of relief washing over him.

“Yes,” Crowley nodded. “I am loath indeed to expel you in this situation. There is a vacant building on campus not currently in use. You may stay there.”

“Aah, that’s great. Umm ...”

“You may call me ‘Headmage,’ Yu.”

“Headmage,” Yuya repeated. “Thank you so much.” Before he knew it, he had taken both of Crowley’s gloved hands in his own, overwhelmed with gratitude.

“Mm, there’s a good boy. Wonderful! My kindness truly knows no bounds!” Crowley smiled, playfully. “Now then. Strike while the iron is hot, as they say! I shall take you to the dorm straightaway. Please do follow me.”



AS THEY PROCEEDED DOWN the dim, deserted corridor, Yuya and Crowley told each other about their respective worlds. Both worlds had schools, and their civilizations appeared to be more or less the same. As the commonality of smartphones demonstrated, science and technology had progressed along similar paths.

This world had an extra force, however: magic. Crowley was surprised when Yuya said there was no magic where he came from, but that was the only major difference they'd discovered so far. Who knew what other things might turn out to be fantastical in his world but ordinary in this one? He couldn't let his guard down. He had to be ready so that he wouldn't be surprised, no matter what came at him. Hanging his head, he gave himself a little pep talk and tried to prepare for whatever the future here held.

"Now then!" Crowley tapped something hard with his cane. "We are about to leave the school building."

"Huh?" Yuya lifted his face and immediately squeezed his eyes shut at the dazzling glare. He felt a breeze blowing, and a new scent reached his nose—the fragrance of a chilly tide.

He gingerly opened his eyes to find the night sky spreading out before him.

In the center was the full moon, bright enough that he could see the patterns on the ground. He'd seen the moon through the window before,

but looking up at it again now, he felt overwhelmed by its vastness. It was so bright that he couldn't see any stars.

"Huh?" He frowned. "Why would you have an orientation at night?"

"Because, unlike other schools, we are a prestigious institute for the cultivation of mages!" Crowley declared. "Naturally, we hold our important ceremonies at night."

"Makes sense," Yuya replied. Here it was already, the first piece of this world's unexpected "common sense."

He looked at his feet and the light of the moon reflecting off the gray stone tiles. There was nothing else around them, only the dark sky and the ground shining palely.

As they walked, the world suddenly opened up. Yuya caught sight of a very long staircase, and at the bottom of it, far below, a variety of structures dotted the landscape—tall buildings, ridged roofs, domes. He'd thought the school itself was plenty big, but the overall campus was larger than he could have imagined.

The windows and the streetlamps shone earnestly, undaunted by the light of the moon. Although Yuya couldn't see anything other than the moon in the sky, the tiny flickering lights of the townscape looked like stars and made it seem like the night sky continued to stretch out beneath itself.

"It's beautiful," Yuya murmured with emotion as he looked down on the campus from up high.

"Isn't it, though?" Crowley puffed his chest up proudly. "All these magnificent structures provide an environment that cultivates a rich and full humanity in our students."

"Is the building I'm staying in down there?"

"Of course! It is one of the most elegant and refined on campus, with plenty of character. Only a little farther now. Let us hurry along," Crowley urged.

Yuya stepped out onto the first stair and faltered a bit at the height, but his mood was a little brighter now, perhaps because of the beautiful view. He made his way down the steep staircase with care, mindful of where he set his feet.

“And here we are!” Crowley declared, with an expansive wave of his arm. “Step through the gate and behold your new lodgings, Yu.”

Kree! There was an earsplitting metallic shriek in response.

“This ... gate?” Yuya asked, eyeing the collection of precipitously inclined iron poles dubiously as they swung back and forth in the wind, threatening to snap off at any moment. Crowley was calling this heap of junk a gate? Yuya touched it timidly, and a rusty chunk crumbled and fell to the ground.

He slipped through the structure that had once apparently been a gate, being careful not to catch his robe on it, and stepped up onto the gently sloping staircase. Somehow, the surrounding air grew darker and more stagnant with every step he took.

The moon that had been so dazzlingly bright when they left the school building was now hidden under a thick blanket of clouds. Weeds grew freely from gaps in the cracked concrete and made the ground beneath his feet even more uncertain. He nearly fell any number of times, propping himself up by clinging to Crowley each time, until they finally arrived at the building itself, a Western-style structure of the sort that didn’t exist in an average residential area in Japan. At the very least, Yuya had never seen a house this big in his own neighborhood.

“Long, long ago, this was used as a dorm,” Crowley said, his tone wistful, as he looked up at the large door. “It’s equipped with all the necessary facilities—lounge, student rooms, bathroom, small kitchen.”

It had likely been quite an impressive place in its heyday. The pillars bracing the eaves were reassuringly sturdy, and the heavy door was solidly built. The issue was its age. The gate was in the advanced stages of decay, and the building itself was in terrible shape. The light bulb at the entrance was broken, and the porch was riddled with holes. The window on the door was still intact, but given the general condition of the place, this felt like a minor miracle. The paint was peeling off swollen exterior walls, which rippled in deformed waves.

Yuya quickly glanced around the rest of the property. Rain shutters and roof tiles littered the garden, where broken trees had been left to rot. This “dorm” was basically a haunted house.

The key ring at Crowley’s waist jangled as he pulled it out and unerringly plucked an unadorned silver key from the dozens of other keys.

He inserted this into the lock on the door.

Yuya watched as the door still refused to open. “Is that the right key?”

“This should be it.” Crowley frowned. “I suppose the lock’s simply gotten a bit stiff because it hasn’t been used for quite some time.”

It had been so long since anyone had come here that the lock had rusted. Yuya wasn’t sure which was worse, sleeping in this place or in the creepy room with all the coffins he had left behind. Just as he was wondering whether he should ask if the latter was still an option, the door opened with a squealing creak.

“Oh! There we are!” Crowley said and stepped inside.

Yuya took a deep breath and then followed the headmage.

The house stank of mold, like a compressed and compacted version of the air found in the farthest reaches of a library. Yuya coughed as he walked down the hallway with Crowley.

True to the impression Yuya had gotten from its exterior, the building was quite large inside, but furniture was scattered all across the hallway, and it was no small bit of work to weave their way around it. While his attention was occupied by where he was stepping, his head collected spiderwebs. The “lounge” they eventually arrived at was filled with the same mess of broken furniture.

“Isn’t it delightful?” Crowley looked back at Yuya with a smile. “I grant you, it is a *touch* old, but nothing a broom and some elbow grease can’t fix! You’ll have a shipshape place to spend the night in no time.”

He righted a candlestand that had fallen on top of the hearth and set a hand over it. The candles immediately sprang to life and set small shadows—maybe spiders, maybe mice—scurrying away.

Yuya looked around the room in trepidation.

“Well, then!” Crowley stamped his cane against the floor. “I’m off to investigate your place of origin in the library.”

“What?” Yuya said. “You’re leaving?”

“We must all use our time effectively. I hope at the very least to learn a little something about this world you came from.” Crowley grinned and dipped his head, causing spiderwebs to catch on his top hat. “I’ll no doubt return shortly. Please feel free to make yourself comfortable.”

He left Yuya in the lounge and firmly closed the door behind him, bringing down a storm of accumulated dust.

“Make myself comfortable, he says,” Yuya muttered under his breath. He was more likely to choke to death on the dust swirling through the air. With a sigh, he set himself to cleaning the lounge so he could spend the night there.

Candleholder in hand, he stepped into the corridor, careful of the warped floorboards under his feet. He tentatively opened the small door at the end of the corridor and found a storeroom, just as he’d expected. He took an ancient broom from inside and returned to the lounge. He yanked open the windows and began to sweep the floor, pulling up a thick layer of dust like peeling skin.

As he coughed and cleaned, he heard a pitter-patter against the wall, a quiet sound that quickly changed to the burbling of water.

“It’s raining,” he realized.

The gentle rhythm of falling rain steadily increased in volume as the sudden shower turned into a full-blown storm. In the distance, he heard thunder rumbling like the purring of a happy cat. The bright moon and clear skies of the orientation seemed like a faraway dream now—or perhaps that had been magic, too. He could almost hear Crowley saying, “Naturally, we take measures to ensure that this important ceremony sees a successful conclusion.”

The air coming through the windows was cooler now, perhaps because of the rain. The long-sleeved robe he was wearing—apparently, Night Raven College’s ceremonial dress—was perfect for the current temperature.

When he heard the word “orientation,” he’d assumed it was spring, but it was fall, one of the four seasons of this world that matched the world he’d come from. He’d heard that schools overseas started their new school year in the fall, and from the style of the buildings he’d seen so far, the structure of this college did seem to be more closely related to schools in Europe or America than in Japan.

He crouched down and peered into the large fireplace, wondering if he could maybe light a fire to make the room a little brighter, but there was nothing in it except charred remnants of fires past. He had no idea where to find something he could burn, nor did he have any matches that he could use to actually light a fire. He stood up with a sigh. There was nothing he could do here.

What would the others do in this situation? Would they use magic, like Crowley lighting the candles with a wave of his hand, or Riddle and Grim at the orientation? How had he ended up in such a weird world?

I'm all alone.

As he stared into the fireless fireplace, Yuya was suddenly overcome with loneliness. What were his parents doing right now?

He didn't know what time it was, but he guessed it had been a while since he'd woken up in the Mirror Chamber. His parents would have come home from work by now. Were they worried because he wasn't there? He didn't have any friends here he could lose track of time hanging out with. Once his parents noticed their son hadn't come home yet, they would almost certainly be worried. As he pictured the faces of his loving parents, he had a sudden realization.

If he couldn't go back to his original world, he'd never see his mom and dad again.

Now for the first time, his fear took on a definite shape, pressing down on him. He had been entirely preoccupied by one bewildering incident after another, which had been a good thing. It had kept him busy enough that he could allow himself to believe that everything happening to him was part of an extremely weird dream, that this unfamiliar world and its dangerous magic were all someone else's problem.

But now that he was alone, he was forced to face it. Would he never see his parents again? What if he had to live here, alone, in this place where magic actually existed?

He felt something hot in the corners of his eyes. Reflexively, he reached up, about to brush away the tears, but then hesitated given how dusty his hands were. He tilted his head back and took a deep breath.

He was determined not to cry because he was scared, not at this age. He was embarrassed by his tears, even though there was no one around to see them. It would all be fine. Something would work out. There was nothing to cry about, he told himself, and tried to swallow the sobs that threatened to spill out of him.

Then he heard a wet *splat*. It wasn't the wetness of tears falling, though. With a gasp, he held up the candle in the direction the sound had come from and saw a wet piece of fabric on the floor beneath the window. It

looked like the curtain had ripped right off due to the extra weight of the rain soaking it. Everything in this building really was ancient.

As Yuya went over to the window to close it, when something leaped at his chest out of nowhere.

“Waah?!” he cried as he fell flat on his backside, and a dazzling blue flame burned before him.

“Gwah! It’s seriously pouring out there,” said a voice.

“G-G ...” Yuya’s mouth gaped open and shut.

The thing grinned and laughed, “Myah ha ha! That look on your face is priceless. Like a bat that got blasted by a water gun!”

“Grim?!”

Laughing at him once more was the little creature that had started chasing him around the moment he’d opened his eyes in the Mirror Chamber.

But Grim had been kicked out of the school at the orientation. He’d caused such a ruckus that Yuya had assumed the school would have put some kind of measure in place to make sure he couldn’t step onto the campus again. So how had he gotten in here? Maybe no one thought he would be so persistent.

When Yuya looked closely, he saw that Grim was missing the shackle Riddle had locked around his neck. “What are you doing here?!” he yelped.

“It’s obvious, duh.” Grim rolled his eyes. “I’m here to fight you so’s I can be a student at this college! People keep gettin’ in my way, but this time for sure, you’re going down!”

“Wait! There’s no point in fighting me.” Yuya stopped Grim with both hands as the creature started to take a deep breath. “I’m not a student here.”

A lick of fire flickered out from between fangs. “Huh? Whaddya mean?”

Yuya told Grim what had happened after he’d left the Mirror Chamber.

“You mean, you can’t use magic?” Grim scrutinized him with wide eyes.

“Exactly.” Yuya nodded.

“Whoa! Didn’t see that one coming.” Grim shook his head, slowly. “Sucks to be you.”

“Uh! You don’t have to actually say it.” Yuya groaned. The desire to flee that had welled up in him during the orientation was rekindled. He wanted to be anywhere but there.

As if to strike the final blow on an increasingly despondent Yuya, Grim let out a huge sigh. “So beating you to a pulp’s not gonna get me in, huh? Welp. Guess I better think up another way.”

“Another way?” Yuya asked.

“Yup.” Grim inched closer. “I take *you* hostage and threaten the headmage.”

Yuya shoved the creature back with the broom. Although Grim seemed to have given up on the idea of fighting him, he couldn’t let his guard down just yet. “Why don’t you give up already?”

“Don’t be stupid. I ain’t never giving up,” Grim declared, and leaped up onto the back of the sofa. Even in that position, he still wasn’t quite at eye level with Yuya. Nevertheless, he began to speak with overwhelming passion. “I was *born* to do this! I’m a magical prodigy who’s got the makings to become one of the greatest mages who ever lived. Which is why I figured I’d be a shoo-in for the famed Night Raven College, and why I was waitin’ and waitin’ for that black carriage to come for me. And yet ... it never did.”

Grim fell silent, drops of rainwater falling from the tips of his drooping ears. He looked so much like a stuffed animal when he wasn’t moving that, with him soaking wet and hanging his head like this, Yuya almost felt sorry for him.

While Yuya struggled with how to respond, Grim suddenly shook himself like a dog, and water went flying everywhere.

“Hrmph!” Grim snorted. His brash grin was back on his face. “That Dark Mirror and the headmage got no eye for talent! I’m totes destined for greatness, to be the most powerful mage *ever*. Not lettin’ me in is a great loss for the whole wide world! I *am* going to school here, whatever it takes!”

“But you don’t know what they’ll do to you next time,” Yuya protested. “You’re already in so much trouble. Just give it up.”

“Never! I *will* be a great mage!” Grim screeched, and it was clear that he would not listen to a word that Yuya had to say.

Yuya couldn't handle Grim setting everything on fire again, so he held his hands palms out, placatingly. "Okay, fine. I get it. What do you mean by all this 'great mage' stuff anyway?"

"So okay, a great mage, right—we're talkin' the most amazing mage ever!" Grim said.

Yuya was pretty sure this was not really an explanation.

But Grim ignored his doubtful demeanor and went on, eyes shining brightly as he recounted his dreams to Yuya: "A great mage's super popular. And powerful. You want something done, *that's* the guy you call. When *I'm* a great mage, everyone'll be all, 'Grim's so cool!' and 'Grim's so strong!' and 'What a genius Grim is!' Total respect!"

"Wow. Sounds amazing." Yuya was only going along with Grim, trying not to stir anything up, but Grim seemed satisfied.

He snickered somewhat derisively. "That's the dream, eh? But too bad for you! Can't use magic, so you can't be a great mage, woh-kay? What I'm sayin' here's, you got no chance. Uh-uh!"

"I'm maybe ... fine with that?" Yuya said.

"Liar! Ain't a soul alive who doesn't wanna be a great mage." Grim crossed his arms with a malicious smirk. "No point in pretending you're all tough. I mean, truth is, you *gotta* be wishing you could use magic like me."

Yuya pictured it for a moment. What if he could use magic? It *would* be handy, and probably lots of fun. But that didn't mean he was stewing in his own thwarted ambitions or feeling panicky. Grim could boast and brag until the sun set, but Yuya didn't feel so much as a twinge of jealousy toward these magic users.

"D-do you even get it?" Grim stammered. "If you were a powerful mage, you could do anything! Everything! With magic."

Magic. A parallel world. Yuya honestly couldn't care less. He only wanted one thing right now: to go back to his own world.

"You've got some screws loose, buddy." Grim pursed his lips in a pout and sat on the sofa. Suddenly, he opened his eyes wide. "Whoa! The bottoms of my feet are all white!"

"Oh, wow. They are." Yuya peered at his paw pads, which now looked like bits of cotton. "I guess it's because you were walking around this

dusty place after getting soaked by the rain.” Yuya had only finished cleaning half the floor, after all, and hadn’t even gotten started on the sofa.

“Dust?” Grim looked around like he was only just noticing the state of the room. “Oh, yeah. Everything *is* all whiteish, and it stinks like mold. How’m I supposed to sleep here? Get cleaning already!”

“Huh?” Yuya wondered whether he’d heard wrong. “Did you just say ‘sleep’?”

“Yup.” Grim nodded, firmly.

“You’re planning on staying here?!”

“You betcha. You seem like a guy who maybe gets it. I won’t take you hostage for now. So gimme a place to live instead.”

“But, Grim,” Yuya protested. “You just got thrown off campus. The headmage’s going to be back soon, and honestly, I really don’t need any more trouble.”

“You gonna shoo me out into this rainstorm?” Grim turned incredulous eyes on him. “You’re a cold one, dang. So you’re saying you don’t care if my fur gets soaking wet, and I catch a cold, and it goes and turns into pneumonia?!”

“I didn’t say that. I mean, I didn’t, but—” Yuya really didn’t want to aggravate Grim, but he got the feeling that letting the creature who’d disrupted the orientation so spectacularly stay was only going to be a headache for him. While he struggled to decide what to do, Grim suddenly screeched and leaped up.

“Mrrao! Something just fell on my back!”

“Huh? Was it ...” Yuya looked up at the ceiling and glimpsed a wet spot. “Of course there’s a leak! How old is this building?!”

“Meaah!” Grim snarled. “Get up there and fix that garbage roof!”

“Uh? I can’t.” Yuya stared at him, blankly. “I’ve never repaired a roof before in my life.”

“You could just magic those holes—oh, wait. Right. You can’t use magic.” Grim burst out laughing. “Man, you’re sooooo useless! ’Kay, fine, then. Boring guy like you can just go and get a boring bucket or whatever, can’t ya?”

Yuya turned exasperated eyes on Grim. This creature clearly only cared about himself.

Grim rolled around laughing on the sofa, and then abruptly stopped. “Meeah!”

“What? More rain?”

“Myah! Myah!” Grim reached out toward Yuya.

“Uh? Are you trying to give something?” He held his own palms out in return, and these were slapped away immediately.

“No, you dolt!” Grim yelled. “Behind you!”

“Behind me?” Yuya turned around and saw white smoke drifting up the middle of the room. He assumed at first that it was another fire, but he couldn’t see any flames. Where was the smoke coming from? He cocked his head curiously to one side as he looked down and then up.

“Hee hee!” The white smoke echoed with laughter as a face formed within the shapeless mist and met the astonished Yuya’s eyes before it started flying around the room. “Yee hee hee! Yeeeeee hee hee hee!”

With shaking hands, Yuya tried to shine a light on it, but the smoke slipped away into the darkness. He peered into the gloom, trying to follow it.

“We haven’t had visitors in ages!” came a voice. The abrupt words sent shivers up Yuya’s spine. “How long has it been anyway?”

Lightning flashed outside the windows, and a bolt thundered nearby, as if to further shred the ripped curtain, and for a split second, the dark room was bright as day.

“Welcome to our home!” the voice continued as a semitransparent *something* floated in midair, smiling creepily as it stretched out its hands.

“Ghost!” Yuya yelped.

White, floating, and see through; Yuya and Grim were definitely staring at a ghost.

“Stay away from me!” Grim cried, whipping the ghost with his tail.

But the white haze only vanished into nothing for a moment before quickly coalescing again into its original form. No matter how hard Grim tried to smack down the ghost, his tail simply passed right through it. Meanwhile, the ghost seemed utterly unfazed by the entire situation.

“W-w-w-what in the world?! My tail’s all tingly!” Grim tucked his tail between his legs and shrank back against Yuya’s legs.

The ghost giggled gleefully again.

Yuya suddenly realized they weren't up against just one ghost. Several pairs of eyes appeared in the air, all of them staring down at him from every direction.

"Always nice to have visitors," one ghost commented. "We get so bored, ya know?"

"All the people who used to live here got scared of us and ran away," noted another. "Real weird!"

Their white bodies had no legs, instead stretching and trailing off into nothing, like a lizard's tail. They bobbed toward Yuya and Grim, gently, but with an air of finality, somehow.

Yuya felt a powerful chill. As the ghosts approached, he felt as if he'd been tossed into a vat of ice water. His legs trembled, his jaw shook, and his teeth chattered. He wondered if the icy tendrils creeping up from his feet would eventually reach his heart.

He could see the light of the candle on the table through the bodies of the ghosts.

"We just want some new pals to play with," a ghost said as it leaned in, colored red by the flame, and its face was abruptly enormous, lips pulled back in a frightening snarl of a smile. "How 'bout we make *you* into ghosts!"

Maybe it was because his legs were frozen—or maybe it was the terror—but Yuya couldn't move. Or scream. He was rooted to the spot, while next to him, Grim's ears twitched. He guessed Grim was probably just as scared he was and lowered his gaze—then nearly did a double take. The look on Grim's face was the exact opposite of what he'd expected.

Grim's nose was wrinkled, and his throat rumbled with a low growl. Flames flickered out from between his fangs, and his eyes blazed with outrage. "I ... I ain't afraid of *ghosts*!" he exclaimed.

When the ghosts had first appeared, Grim had shrunk up against Yuya in fear, but he had clearly gotten over that initial shock. All his fur was standing on end as he aggressively leaned forward. How could he be so determined, even now? Yuya looked on in surprise while Grim stood on all fours and shouted, "I'll show you what I got!"

Pwaaan! The area around them grew abruptly brighter. Flames lapped at the floor and walls. It was the orientation all over again.

“Gah! Don’t! You’re gonna set the place on fire!” Yuya grimaced at the heat and reached out to try to stop Grim, but the creature slipped away, chasing after the circling ghosts, balls of fire flying everywhere.

Pop. Pop.

“Not even close!” one ghost taunted. “Go ahead and fire off your sad little magic until you die! Cause we can’t, y’know? We’re already dead and everything.”

“Shaddap!” The angry Grim kept shooting off fireballs indiscriminately.

Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.

Yuya raced around and put out the tiny fires with his shoe or his hand covered in his sleeve.

The rain was actually a blessing, he realized. Because of it, the room was so damp that the flames basically just smoldered when they hit the floor or the furniture. But he could tell that the constant heat of the fire was starting to dry out the dampness. It was only a matter of time before one of those fireballs truly lit something on fire. If he didn’t put an end to this, the building really would burn down.

“Grim, stop! Stop it! Calm down!” Yuya shouted desperately, but his voice was drowned out by the rain beating against the windows.

“Hee hee hee! Missed by a country mile! Over here! This way!” a ghost taunted.

“Argh! You got a lotta nerve for someone who’s see through! Quit popping up and disappearing already!” Grim growled.

Yuya’s head spun as the ghosts roared with laughter and Grim just roared. The intensifying thunderstorm only made his panic that much more acute. He was so scared and worried he could hardly stand it, his heart leaping and pounding in his chest.

Why did Grim keep missing the ghosts, anyway? It definitely wasn’t because the ghosts were moving too fast. They bobbed toward them and away again, gently drifting around Grim and Yuya as if teasing them. They were moving so slowly that Yuya could probably have tossed a ball and hit one of them.

Did the ghosts have some kind of special power? He examined them carefully.

No, it was Grim. He was closing his eyes every time he let loose a fireball, and there was no way he was going to hit anything firing blindly

like that.

At last, flames began to eat away at the sofa.

I have to stop this.

Yuya clenched his fists in determination and crept toward Grim. The monster was totally focused on the ghosts in front of him and had apparently forgotten all about Yuya.

Waiting for the moment when the jet of fire streaming from Grim's fanged mouth broke off, Yuya grabbed Grim with both hands and lifted him up into the air, then started running, eyes straight ahead, not looking back.

He couldn't dodge the ghost blocking his way forward, so he slipped right through its white body. He reflexively screamed at the sudden chill that wrapped around him, which felt like standing in front of an open refrigerator door. Stumbling forward, he managed to escape into the hallway, slamming the lounge door shut so hard it threatened to break.

"Th-that was too freaky," he said as he slumped down onto the floor in front of the door, the nervous tension draining from his body all at once.

Grim was frozen in his arms, perhaps still processing his sudden abduction. But then he let out a gasp of realization and glared up at Yuya, demanding, "What're you *doing*, you jerk? I had everything under control!"

"You nearly burned the whole building down!" Yuya snapped in reply.

"Fine," Grim sniffed. "Then *you* deal with 'em."

"I ..." Yuya shook his head back and forth so hard it nearly flew off his neck. "I can't."

"Oh? What, you a widdle scaredy-cat?" Grim sneered.

"It's just—I mean, I've never been in a fight before."

"Shut it, then. I don't need any lip from a useless human."

"Sorry."

Grim was painfully correct. There was nothing Yuya could do except apologize, but if he gave up now, the best-case scenario was that they ended up "pals" with the ghosts. Worst case was the same, except with extra suffering as they were burned alive along with the building.

"Listen." Yuya worked hard to keep his voice even. "I was watching you in there. You kept closing your eyes when you were using your magic,

y’know? And I just kinda feel like maybe it’s gonna be hard to hit anything like that?”

“Uh?” Grim cocked his head to one side, pursed his lips, and mimicked himself shooting fire. And apparently noticed for the first time that he did indeed have such a habit. “Well, I can’t help it. When I go *ooh* with my mouth, my eyes go *enh*,” he said, showing Yuya his technique.

This seemed pretty clumsy to Yuya, like not being able to walk and chew gum at the same time. But maybe he was in no position to talk; while running toward the ghost, he had been so scared he’d squeezed his own eyes shut. Perhaps deep down Grim was scared, too, he realized. Grim had the courage to face the ghosts all alone though—unlike Yuya, who had simply frozen in place.

Couldn’t Yuya at least help him? After considering it for a minute, he had a flash of insight and looked down at Grim on his lap. “I got it. There’s an easy fix here. I’ll tell you where the ghosts are. Like, right, left, up, that kind of thing. Then you shoot fire in that direction. That way, your magic might hit them?”

“Huh? Why should I take orders from *you*?” Grim said, insulted, and began to flail against Yuya. He was clearly raring to charge back into the lounge and start firing again.

“Wait.” Yuya squeezed Grim tightly to hold him in place. “Just listen to me.”

“Nope!” Grim said, still squirming. “You think you’re all hot stuff when you didn’t even do a single thing in there!”

“I’m sorry!” Yuya said again. “But if you don’t—”

“You about done here?” came a bright voice abruptly from above his head, and he nearly replied to it automatically. He managed to hold his tongue, and ever so timidly, looked up. A ghost’s torso was poking through the closed door.

“Waah! A ghost!” Yuya exclaimed. When the ghosts slipped through the wall, Yuya and Grim leaped backward. The ghosts gave them a once-over.

“Sorry to bug ya in the middle of yer chitchat,” one said. “We jus’ got sick of waiting is all.”

The end of Yuya’s nose grew cold. The ghosts were almost on top of them. “Get away from us!” he cried.

“Stay back!” Grim yelled.

Yuya thrust his hands out at the ghosts, and Grim breathed fire, lost in the moment.

“Aah! It burns!” a ghost yelped.

The ghosts were on fire. Actually, they were less on fire and more riddled with holes where the fire had shot through them. Just like a shadow disappears when its owner steps out into the light, the bodies of the ghosts disappeared under the bright gleam of flames. Grim had finally made a hit.

“Piece of cake,” Grim said, looking at the panicking ghosts. “Hey, human! Point me toward a ghost!”

“Y-you got it!” Yuya said as he picked the creature up again and carefully aimed him at a ghost. “Now!”

The world before him flashed with a pale light.

“Gaah!” Another ghost was knocked flying by Grim’s blast.

“Ha, got one! I knew I was a total whiz with magic!” Grim said as he looked back at Yuya and grinned. “Keep ’em coming, human!”

“Roger!” Yuya said.

Though Grim had objected to Yuya’s earlier suggestion of telling him which way to aim, they were essentially doing that now. But they were moving together rather than Grim obeying Yuya’s orders, which seemingly made this arrangement more acceptable to Grim.

In fact, he seemed to be having fun as he let his fire fly. Yuya supported him with both arms, as if he were gripping a hose with the water turned all the way on, and together, they dispersed the ghosts.

“Myah ha! I am the greatest!” Grim crowed.

“Y-you’re heavy.” Yuya’s hands were already slipping from the weight of this creature that was much bigger and heavier than the average house cat, and the recoil from every fireball nearly knocked him over backward.

“Quit yer bellyaching,” Grim said merrily, and whapped his arms. He was in high spirits now that he had gotten himself the perfect vehicle.

When the flames hit the ghosts, instead of spreading, they quietly fizzled out like they’d been doused with water. All around them, Yuya could hear the soft hiss of ghosts disappearing.

“Eeee!” a ghost wailed. “No fair ganging up on us!”

“Shaddap!” Grim snarled. “There are way more of you!”

One ghost after another fled through the wall. Yuya chased them into the lounge and surveyed every nook and cranny of the room, holding Grim at

the ready.

A chorus of ghostly voices sounded, “Hwaaaaah!”

“They’re gonna disappear us for good!”

“Retreat! Fall back! We’ve gotta get out of here!”

Before Yuya knew it, the laughter and the screams had stopped, and the only sound in the lounge was his and Grim’s panting. The storm outside had also faded into gentle rainfall. The flying herd of ghosts was nowhere to be seen, and the room was in more or less good shape. It did smell a little charred, but otherwise, it was the same dark and damp lounge.

Grim leaped out of Yuya’s arms. As he landed, he put his hands on his hips and threw his head back proudly. “How’d ya like *that*! I totally smashed those ghosts!”

“That was amazing, Grim!” Yuya agreed.

“Y-yeah ...” A surprised look flashed across Grim’s face, and he averted his eyes, flustered. He had been so confident and full of pride, and yet when someone actually paid him a compliment, he seemed oddly flabbergasted.

Yuya had to smile at the situation.

“Mee hee hee!” Grim chuckled. “You were maybe all right yourself.” His grin was as malicious as ever, but Yuya wasn’t frightened by it the way he had been the first time he’d seen it.

“What disaster has befallen this place?!” came a loud cry from behind them, sending a jolt through both Yuya and Grim. They looked back in trepidation and found not a ghost in the doorway, but the headmage Crowley.

“Thank goodness, it’s you!” Yuya exclaimed. He was about to explain what had happened when something shot out in front of him.

“This again?” Grim snarled.

When Yuya looked down, Grim was tied up with the headmage’s “tough love.”

“I heard screams as I was returning,” Crowley said, lifting Grim with one hand. “So it was this creature again! Quite the stubborn little beast, hm? I suppose he was getting up to mischief here, too.”

He looked ready to throw Grim through the window, so Yuya hurriedly grabbed his arm. “No, that’s not it. I was attacked by ghosts, and Grim saved me.”

“Hm?” Crowley frowned. “What do you mean?”

“So earlier ...” Yuya began to explain about Grim coming in through the window, the ghosts attacking, and the two of them working together to chase the ghosts away.

“I see.” The headmage nodded. “Then the screams I heard were those of the ghosts?”

“Zactly! I’m innocent, I tells ya!” Grim thrashed around, held by the scruff of his neck.

“Now that you mention it,” Crowley mused, “I do seem to recall that some mischievous ghosts took up residence in this dorm and scared away all the students. I’d completely forgotten that was why it was abandoned.”

And you were going to make me spend the night in a haunted dorm? You forgot it was haunted?! What if I had actually been turned into a ghost? What would you do then?

Yuya put this question to him in gentler terms, and Crowley laughed. “Absurd! That was merely an old ghost joke.” He looked thoughtfully down at Grim hanging from his hand. “But to think that this one here would assist anyone. Yu, you’ve done well to tame such a ferocious monster.”

“Ex-cuse me? Tame?” Grim snorted derisively. “This kid’s a total waste of skin. But I managed to make him useful!”

“There, you see?” Crowley gestured toward the angry Grim. “Very defiant. You have remarkable skills to be able to bend one like this to your will.”

Yuya mustered up the courage to ask what he really wanted to know. “Um, Headmage?” he began.

“Yes?” Crowley looked up at him.

“So, um,” Yuya mumbled. “Are you finished with your research in the library?”

All expression disappeared abruptly from the headmage’s face. He tilted his head slightly to one side and nodded slowly. He appeared to be choosing his words carefully. “I am indeed finished. I did not contain my search to the library, but rather availed myself of every method I could think of—asking the other teachers, looking online, all of that.”

Yuya silently urged him to continue.

“But despite my best efforts, I could find no trace of this ‘Japan’ that you spoke of,” Crowley told him. “It has never existed anywhere in Twisted Wonderland at any point in recorded history.”

“So that’s it, then.” Yuya sighed.

“Yes. You have indeed come from a different world. But the confounding factor here is the total lack of information. In the hundred years that I’ve been headmage, I can safely say that I have been witness to a great many surprises, but I have never encountered anything like this. And without any precedents, I could not find a way to return you to your original world.”

“You couldn’t ...” Even said so bluntly, it didn’t feel real. Yuya had been so scared by the prospect of being trapped there that he’d nearly burst into tears, and yet when he was told that this was effectively the position he was in, he couldn’t quite believe it. Deep down, he had assumed that this would all work out somehow, convinced that something so cruel could never happen to someone so utterly average as him.

But he was wrong. No one knew how to get him home. If there was some way to do it, it was not going to be easy to figure out. How was he supposed to keep going now? What was there to live for when he woke up in the morning?

Crowley lowered Grim to the floor and cleared his throat. Yuya automatically shuddered.

“Well, this is difficult to say,” Crowley began, “but given that you are not a student at our fine college, I cannot allow you to stay here for free. Education must be fair above all else.”

“Okay.” Yuya could only hang his head at this.

“However,” Crowley paused, thoughtfully, “I believe accommodations might be made if you would consider working for me.”

“Huh?” Yuya’s face shot up, and he stared at the headmage.

“Except for the faculty, everyone employed at the college is a ghost. But a staff of ghosts is not always optimal, you see.” Crowley’s eyes shone. It was hard to tell because of the mask he was wearing, but his mouth was curling up slightly in what appeared to be a smile.

“It would truly pain me as an educator to abandon a boy without a penny to his name. I would personally find it a great help if you were to do odd jobs on campus while I attempt to find a way to return you to your original

world. As for pay, well, that would be an amount commensurate with the work performed.” He smiled. “What do you think?”

Yuya wanted to hug him. He’d be able to keep going for now, at least. Crowley was giving him a roof over his head and food on his table. Not to mention a purpose. “I think that sounds great,” he said. “Thank you so much.” In his great relief, the tears he’d held back earlier rolled down his cheeks.

“Dear me!” Crowley laughed. “Well, my charity knows no bounds. Oh! There is just one condition.”

“Sure!” Yuya nodded. “What is it?”

“You must attend to Grim,” he stated firmly.

“Huh? Grim?” He pointed automatically at the disgruntled monster, and Grim’s ears twitched.

“What? Me?!”

“Yes,” Crowley replied. “Given that you are unable to use magic, I am somewhat concerned about leaving you alone on campus, Yu. But with Grim by your side, you should be able to handle anything that might come up. Monster and magic-free alien. It’s best that the two of you join forces, and from what I can see, you’ve already gotten quite friendly.”

“But I—” Yuya protested, but Crowley cut him off.

“He is unusually persistent, you see. Who knows what he’ll get up to if left to his own devices? But I know I won’t have anything to worry about if you’re with him, Yu.”

Crowley was trying to get rid of a nuisance by making Grim Yuya’s responsibility. He was about to insist that he really wouldn’t be able to rein Grim in when the monster in question shoved him out of the way.

“So I can go to school here?!” Grim shouted with delight.

“No,” Crowley said in a clipped tone. “I told you. You will stay on at the school to do odd jobs, cleaning the campus and maintaining the facilities. You will not be a student.”

“Cleaning?” Grim was obviously unhappy with this. “What kinda deal is that? I’m gonna look so stupid. I don’t wanna sweep up people’s junk!”

“How shameless of you!” the headmage cried angrily. The winds were suddenly blowing in a dangerous direction. Crowley looked as though he might take back his offer at any second.

Yuya yanked Grim back in a panic and whispered in his large ears, “Quit it. If you keep this up, he’ll throw you out again, okay?”

“But I don’t wanna be a janitor,” Grim whined.

Yuya could only stay there on the condition that Grim stayed with him. Living with this selfish creature was bound to be rough, but it had to be better than being shut out in the cold. And Crowley was right—Yuya would be happy to have the help of someone who could use magic. He crouched down so he was at eye level with Grim. The monster was clearly dissatisfied with the special requirement, but this made Yuya feel like he could count on him somehow.

“I just know the headmage’ll let you in at some point if you stick with me,” he said, desperately trying to persuade Grim that this was in both of their best interests. “I mean, he’s got to, right?”

“Hmm,” Grim grunted as he looked away and crossed his arms.

“And if you get thrown out again, I know you’ll only sneak right back in, yeah?” Yuya continued. “So living here with me saves you a whole lot of work.”

“Mm mm mm.”

“They’ll feed you, and you won’t have to wander around in the rain anymore.”

“Feed us.” Grim turned and met his eyes. “You mean I can have a can of tuna whenever I want?”

“Yes, exactly.” He bobbed his head up and down. Tuna was Grim’s thing? Yuya could probably make that happen.

Perhaps Yuya’s pleas had struck a chord, or maybe Grim realized that the arrangement was to his advantage. He put his hands on his hips and said, “Fine. I will deign to live here with you. And I’ll work. For now, anyway.”

“Wonderful! It’s a done deal then,” Crowley nodded, having watched over the proceedings. “Once you’ve finished with your official duties, you may of course make use of the library and the other facilities as you please. I’ve no doubt that you would like to do some research yourself, Yuya. You may also use this dorm however you like.”

“Great, thanks,” Yuya said.

Crowley took a silver key from the bundle on his key ring. Yuya recognized it as the key to this building from the glimpse he’d gotten

when they had first arrived at the dorm. It was a simple old thing, but it was scratch-free and gleaming brightly, as if someone had taken good care of it.

Yuya clenched it tightly in his fist. "Thank you so much for this opportunity!" he said, shaking Crowley's hand with his free hand and letting out a sigh of relief. He wouldn't have to worry about how he'd get by while he figured out where to go from here.

He and Crowley grinned at each other, while at their feet, Grim tapped his claws loudly against the white bag Crowley was carrying.

"This is smelling reaaaal good," Grim remarked.

"Ah, so you noticed!" Crowley exclaimed, delighted. "There's a pot of soup in there. You *are* hungry, aren't you?"

"So it *is* food!" Grim leaped forward.

"No!" Crowley yanked the bag up and handed it to Yuya. "You'll share it nicely! And you'll do the same tomorrow as well. Starting now, the two of you are one."

Now that Crowley had mentioned it, Yuya was very hungry. He hadn't had anything to eat since his lunch at school, and he had no idea how long ago that had been. His stomach was growling.

"Take this as well, Yu." Crowley held out a soft package, and Yuya took it in his arms.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Bedclothes and a school uniform for you to wear tomorrow. You'd no doubt have quite the time trying to get anything done wearing our ceremonial robe. Aah, how truly thoughtful I am!"

Yuya was concerned about being in uniform when he wasn't a student, but Crowley told him they had plenty to spare, so he accepted it. Tentatively opening the package, he glimpsed a black jacket and a white shirt.

"There's actually a vest to complete the set," Crowley told him. "But those are distributed by the dorms. You should be just fine with that."

"Yes, of course," Yuya said. "Thank you so much."

"Proof of my tremendous generosity! Eat and get yourself right to bed. I'll need you to work those fingers to the bone starting tomorrow!" Crowley patted Yuya's shoulder gently and left.

Crowley had an oddly detached air despite his exaggerated expressions of delight, surprise, and sadness. He was a strange person, but he was also the only person Yuya could count on at the moment, as he'd given him food and a place to live. Though he seemed to be a bit half-baked, perhaps he really was just as kind and benevolent as he repeatedly insisted he was. Yuya had no choice but to have faith in that.

"Hey," Grim said.

Yuya looked away from the door Crowley had disappeared through and back at Grim. "What?"

At some point, the monster had gotten up on the table so that he was basically at eye level with Yuya. "What's your name, anyway?"

Yuya realized he hadn't introduced himself yet. "Yuya. Yuya Kuroki."

"Yuah, Yah." Grim frowned. "Uh. That's a tough one. I'm just gonna call ya Yu. Rejoice, Yu! Super genius and future amazing mage Grim's decided to make you his hench-human!" He thrust his chest out in a show of extreme confidence. The white fur there was fluffy and looked soft to the touch. He seemed so pleased with himself that Yuya couldn't bring himself to be annoyed at this absurd declaration and simply laughed instead. Grim was selfish and reckless, but he was also forthright. Yuya felt like he was right to rely on this little monster and his magic ability. It emboldened him somehow, and he suspected his new roommate would be coming to his rescue again and again.

"Mm. Thanks." He extended a hand to shake, just as he had with Crowley. When he gripped Grim's small paw, the tips of sharp claws grazed his palm. He started a little, but they didn't scratch him, and the soft paw pads felt nice in his hand.

"Myah ha!" Grim flashed his teeth. "Mmkay then! Hand over the grub this second!"



HE HEARD LAUGHTER AND VOICES echoing around him.

“Morning!” said a student.

“Good morning!” said another student.

A blackboard white with chalk dust. A clock with a slightly warped second hand. Bulletin board posts faded in the sunlight. The gentle morning light shining hazily on familiar sights.

Yuya was standing in the doorway of a school classroom.

A student near the window looked at the desk beside him. That had been Yuya’s desk since the start of school six months earlier. “Isn’t someone missing?” the student asked, frowning slightly.

The other students around him quizzically cocked their heads to one side. Their eyes surveyed the classroom, and they all slid past Yuya. No one could see him.

“You think?” someone asked.

“Maybe it’s just you?” another guessed.

There wasn’t anything malicious in his classmates’ reactions; they were simply confused.

“Huh. Maybe. Guess that was weird. Sorry.” The boy in the seat next to Yuya’s scratched his head, frowned, and then quickly moved on.

“Did you do the reading?”

“Nah, no time. I had practice.”

“Someone let me look at their notes?”

Friends chatted freely, and not a single person noticed that Yuya was not there with them. It wasn't just that he had been forgotten; it seemed as though they hadn't ever known a student named Yuya Kuroki in the first place.

The bell rang, and his classmates took their seats one after another. Yuya's vacant seat was the only quiet spot in the bustling morning classroom. He felt no sadness or indignation. He was simply, deeply, powerfully relieved.

This was good. It was better this way. This was exactly what he wanted. After all, he'd always, always—



“Hwaaaah!”

A voice loud enough to shake the world around Yuya woke him. He rubbed sleepy eyes, wondering what it could have been as he looked around at the fireless fireplace, the shredded curtains, and the shabby, battered room illuminated by white sunlight.

Right. I'm not at home.

The previous evening, he'd been suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion after eating the meal he'd miraculously kept Grim from snatching away. With no energy left for cleaning any of the other rooms, he'd not so much fallen asleep as lost consciousness on the lounge sofa.

Before the details of his dream had the chance to sink in, someone was slapping his arm and chasing them away.

He looked to one side, and Grim was standing there, glaring at him. “Yu! Up and at 'em!”

“Morning,” Yuya said, looking at Grim with bleary eyes. “What's wrong?”

“Hee hee hee! Mooorniiiing!”

He froze at the sound of this low voice. It wasn't Grim's, and it definitely wasn't his own. Yuya glanced up to see the ghosts they had supposedly chased away the night before floating above him. “Gaah!” He

fell off the sofa in his surprise, and a cloud of dust puffed up around him. He coughed and choked while the ghosts laughed.

“Hee hee hee! The headmage told us you’re gonna be living here!” said the ghost.

“So that means you’re our new pals. Terrific!” another chimed in.

“Who’re you calling a pal?!” Grim grumbled, glaring at the ghosts. “Why’d you come back anyway? You want some more of what I gave ya yesterday?”

“No, no. You young folks’re always raring for a fight,” one of the ghosts said. “Calm down and listen.”

Yuya got up and brushed the dust off his clothes as the ghosts watched. “You okay?” one of them asked.

“I’m okay,” Yuya said, standing next to Grim, who was on high alert.

When the ghosts had assaulted Yuya the day before, it had been dark, and he had truly felt like his life might be in danger. He felt none of that fear now as he faced the ghosts floating before him. Perhaps it was because of the warm sun shining into the room, or maybe it was due to the ghosts all grinning happily, unlike they had been during the encounter yesterday.

He took a moment to really look at them. One was puffed up and soft like a marshmallow, while another was bone thin, and the third looked like a little snowball. All three were wearing silk hats and cloaks, and floating in the middle of the sunny lounge as if they were frolicking at the beach in summer.

“Sorry about yesterday. We were just playing a little praaaank. Never dreamed we’d scare ya like that,” said one.

“Yeah, exactly. You were so scared!” the next added.

“Real nice work on our part!” chimed in the third.

“I was *not* freaked out at all!” Grim snarled as he leaped at them, but they bobbed away to dodge him easily. This infuriated Grim, and the ghosts taunted him one after the other, laughing playfully, clearly enjoying their tricks.

“Look, we really love the way you two get all worked up,” one ghost said placatingly. “Come on, let’s just be friends, okay?”

Yuya pressed a hand over Grim’s mouth, certain that balls of fire would only make everything worse, and bowed his head to his elders. “We’d love

that.” He refused to let this spiral out of control—not when he’d just woken up. Though, now that he thought about it ... “What time is it?”

The hands on the clock hanging on the wall were pointing at the same time they had been the previous night, obviously stopped.

The ghosts immediately began to whirl around in a panic. “You gotta get ready and go to work right now! The headmage sent a message asking you to clean up Main Street today. He also said, ‘Please, no big brouhaha.’”

Yuya quickly made himself presentable and left the decrepit dorm with the ghosts. They were surprisingly full of life in the morning sun as they showed Yuya and Grim the way to Main Street. Dust glittered and sparkled inside their semitransparent bodies, making them seem simultaneously delighted and as mysterious as smoke on a dark stage.

They passed a number of buildings until they reached a wide road.

“This is Main Street,” one of the ghosts told them. “Everyone takes this road to school. You gotta clean it up real nice with your broom and mop so that the new students can enjoy the walk to their first day of classes!”

“Woh-kay, we’re gonna head out on our morning walk,” another said. “You boys get in there and get the job done.”

Heeee hee hee! The ghosts faded away like morning dew, leaving only their laughter behind.

“I can’t believe they just showed us the way and disappeared,” Yuya murmured, staring at the space where the ghosts had been.

“Get the job done? Are they for real? Look how long this road is!” Grim said as he pointed, looking supremely annoyed.

Cobblestones stretched out before them. The road was wide enough that three of Yuya could have lain comfortably side by side. There was a bend about ten meters from where they stood, and the road kept going beyond that with no end in sight. It would probably take them several hours just to clear away the garbage and fallen leaves with a broom.

The sides of the road were lined with large stone statues, and the school sat behind them. Four on the left, three on the right. The stone was smooth and shining. How many years had these statues stood facing one another, polished by unknown caretakers? They were clearly old and well cared for.

“I ran across these guys in the rain yesterday,” Grim remarked. “Kinda surprised me.”

Yuya had felt the same way when he had been walking with Crowley the night before. Whatever else, these statues were obviously not modeled after human beings. He'd passed by them on tenterhooks, worried that these monsters might start moving at any second.

"Who are they anyway?" Grim stared up at the three statues standing on one side of the road. "Check it out. This lady here looks like she's got some real anger management issues." He tossed the bucket and rag the ghosts had given him to one side of the road and mimicked the pose of the statue closest to the school building.

Yuya frowned. Ghosts aside, they needed to do the job Crowley had given them. He really didn't want to disappoint the headmage on their first day and get thrown off campus. He picked up the bucket and was holding it out to Grim, thinking they could talk and clean at the same time, when he heard a voice from behind asking, "You don't know the Queen of Hearts?"

"Huh?" Yuya and Grim gasped as they whirled around. A rich orange leaped into their field of view.

A boy with vivid terra-cotta hair was standing before them. He was either the same age or a little older than Yuya and had a red heart painted over his left eye.

"Who're you?" Grim crossed his arms and glared.

"Sup. Nice to meetcha," the boy said as he gave Grim a snap and a wink. He seemed to be doing this out of habit rather than actual enthusiasm. "Name's Ace. Ace Trappola. I'm a first-year student here as of today! Pleased to meetcha!"

"I'm Grim. I'm a prodigy who's plannin' to be, like, the greatest mage who ever lived. That there's my far less interesting hench-human."

"I'm Yuya Kuroki. Uh, nice to meet you," Yuya stammered. From what Crowley had told him, the majority of the first-years starting at Night Raven College were sixteen years old, which meant Ace was likely the same age as Yuya. He let his eyes roam, feeling a bit awkward.

Ace looked at him curiously. "Yuya? Name's got an odd ring to it."

Both the headmage and Grim had said that Yuya's name was hard to pronounce. Maybe Japanese names sounded weird in this world.

"Yu's just fine, though," Grim told Ace, and Yuya nodded his agreement. Things would be a lot easier if he just introduced himself like that from now on. "So then, Ace. You need something from us?"

“Oh.” Ace chuckled. “I was surprised there’s anyone who doesn’t know the Queen of Hearts is all.”

“Is she that big of a deal, this Queen of Hearts?” Yuya asked.

“Yeah, totally!” The corners of Ace’s mouth shot up. “She was this queen who used to live in a maze of roses way back in the day. She was seriously strict and kinda obsessed with rules. She couldn’t stand anything being out of order—not the procession of the Cards that served her, and definitely not the color of the palace roses.” He looked up at the statue of the Queen of Hearts with Yuya and Grim.

She had a crown on her head and a heart-shaped hand fan in her right hand. Two fingers lifted the hem of her gown, and she held her head high, looking pleased with herself. As Grim had noted, the look on her face was haughty and strongwilled.

“She basically ruled over a kingdom of a real bunch of weirdos,” Ace said. “But not one of them dared defy her.”

“How come?” Yuya asked, and Ace grinned at him, as if he’d been waiting for this question.

“Because the punishment for breaking the rules was your whole head!” he told him with a smirk.

“Th-that is seriously messed up!” Grim cried, and Yuya shuddered alongside him.

“Yeah?” Ace replied, nonchalantly. “I think it’s cool! I’m a big fan. I mean, nobody’s gonna follow a queen who’s nice all the time, y’know?”

“Mmm. I guess so?” Grim shifted his gaze to the other two statues on the side of the road with the Queen of Hearts. He pointed to one of them. “Mmkay then. What about that lion with the scar on his eye there? He as famous as this queen?”

“Natch!” Ace said. “That there’s the King of Beasts, ruler of the vast savannah. Well, I say ‘king,’ but he wasn’t actually born to the throne. He had to earn it with a bunch of elaborate schemes.”

So the lion with the scar over his left eye was called the King of Beasts. He stood proudly with his magnificent mane held high and sharp eyes shining with intelligence. He had clearly been a great ruler.

“I guess after he became king, he decreed that the hyenas wouldn’t be pariahs anymore. He said they should live among his subjects as equals,” Ace explained.

“Huh?” Grim frowned. “Why would he do that?”

“Maybe he could look past status and all that stuff ’cause he hadn’t been born royal himself,” Ace said. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah. When you put it like that, he’s kinda rock and roll!” Grim stood a little taller and set a hand on the pedestal of the stone statue in between the Queen of Hearts and the King of Beasts. “So then who’s this old lady with the octopus legs?”

Just as Grim noted, the lower half of this statue had the limbs of an octopus in place of human legs.

“That’s the Sea Witch. She lived in an underwater grotto.” Ace looked up at the statue with the twisting legs covered in round suckers. “She basically devoted her life to making sad merfolk happy—a real compassionate lady. If they were willing to pay the price, she’d help them change how they looked, find love, whatever!” He pointed at the piece of paper in her right hand. “That thing there’s a contract.”

Her mouth was marked by a beauty spot and stretched out in a wide, generous smile that went nicely with this tale of a compassionate heart doing whatever it took to save merfolk.

“Although they say the price for all that power was a teeeensy bit high,” Ace continued. “But I mean, you’re talking about granting wishes here, so it’s only natural you’d have to pay.”

“Nice.” Grim gazed up at the statue, a dreamy look on his face. “I wanna be a great mage already, too, so I can start raking in the dough. And then I’m gonna eat my fill of canned tuna every day!”

“Ha ha! Sounds like a plan,” Ace laughed. “You gotta dream big, y’know?”

Quite pleased, Grim skipped over to the opposite side of the street. “Oh, oh! Do the dude with the big hat next!”

“That’s the Sorcerer of the Sands.” Ace looked up at the statue of a slim man alongside Grim. “He was an adviser to a total dolt of a sultan. One time, there was this guy who pretended to be a prince from some other country to trick the princess. And the one who exposed this swindler was none other than the sorcerer here!”

The Sorcerer of the Sands held a staff shaped like a snake in his slender fingers, and wore a hat with a feather adorning it and a long cape flowing

down his back. He stood with one hand on his hip, looking thoughtful and majestic.

Yuya was impressed. An adviser who had saved the nation from disaster—he must have been a wonderful and capable person.

“This Sorcerer of the Sands had to have been an excellent judge of character, huh?” he said.

“Prob’ly,” Ace agreed. “Plus, after that, he got this magic lamp that everyone thought was only a legend, and he became the greatest sorcerer in the world. They say he used the power to become sultan himself!”

“Yeah, *real* sorcerers can do pretty much anything!” Grim held his head high, as proud as if he were the sultan, before pestering Ace to explain the next statue to them. “What about this beauty over here?”

“She’s a queen who was said to be the fairest in all the land,” Ace told him.

Yuya looked at the statue closest to the main school building. Just as Ace had said, the queen’s stone statue was so beautiful it made his heart pound a little faster. Even in statue form, she shone brightly, and Yuya would have been too overwhelmed to even meet her eyes if faced with the actual person. She wore a large crown and held the stem of a melting apple between two fingers.

“She used her magic mirror to check how her beauty ranked every day,” Ace continued. “And she’d do whatever it took to make sure she stayed number one. Like, sure, she was naturally beautiful, but she was also always working hard to stay on top. I mean, that’s dedication, you know?”

“She must have been incredibly focused,” Yuya replied. “Seems like a country ruled by a queen like her would be a pretty peaceful place to live.”

“On top of that,” Ace said, lowering his voice slightly, “not only was this total hottie gorgeous, but she was a master of making poisons.”

“Poisons?!” Grim gasped, taking a step back from the statue. “Now we’re in scary town!”

“Well, poison and medicine are flip sides of the same coin.” Ace shrugged. “And maybe she learned that stuff so she could make herself even more beautiful. I mean, she’d go that far for her beauty. Gotta respect the hustle.”

“True. Peeps with that kind of drive are pretty cool.” Grim sounded excited. Ace’s stories about these giants of history were clearly inspiring

his own already grand ambitions.

Yuya was also really enjoying hearing the tales behind the statues. The strange little anecdotes took root in his mind thanks to Ace's storytelling prowess. The way he slipped in jokes and kept the story moving along demonstrated an eloquence beyond his years. Was he really the same age as Yuya? Plus, he was surprisingly good natured, answering Yuya's and Grim's questions without a hint of ill will or frustration, so Yuya found himself warming up to the other boy.

Perhaps feeling his eyes on him, Ace met Yuya's gaze and grinned. He was so cheerful.

There were still two statues left unexplained. Grim stopped in front of one of them.

"Whoa!" he cried. "This guy's head's on fire! He's freaky just to look at!"

"Yup." Ace nodded. "That's the King of the Underworld."

His frightening name was well deserved—the statue was of a man with razor-like teeth who was smiling ferociously as a flame danced up from a long, sharp fingernail.

"He ruled a kingdom crawling with evil spirits—a real powerful dude. And yeah, he maybe does look kinda scary." Ace glanced up at the statue. "But he was a straight shooter who worked superhard at a job he never even asked for without ever taking a day off. Cerberus, the Hydra, the Titans—they all took orders from this guy right here."

"The Titans?" Yuya frowned, confused.

"You don't know 'em?" Ace asked. "Cerberus, the Hydra, and the Titans were these monsters back in the day. All huge and superstrong. The King of the Underworld had to have been something pretty special to have guys like that obeying his every word, y'know?"

"If he was so amazing, he shoulda just forced some other guy to do all that boring work," Grim sniffed. "*I* totally would've."

"But don't you think he's even cooler for not doing that?" Ace asked. "He went in and got the job done." His respect for the ancient king came through loud and clear, and although Grim still looked dubious, he seemed nonetheless impressed.

"Pretty great group, huh?" he said. "Doing all that amazing stuff." He shifted his eyes from statue to statue as he walked alongside Yuya and

Ace, until they reached the last of the stone idols, standing in between the beautiful queen and the Sorcerer of the Sands.

“This one with the horns is the last one?” he asked. “Who’s this?”

“That’s the Thorn Fairy, who lived on a mystical mountain,” Ace said.

She had two large, conspicuous horns sprouting out of her head. At her feet was a statue of a wild rose bush covered in thorns.

“She was noble and elegant and a master of magic and curses, even by the standards of these seven!” Ace told them. “She commanded storms and covered the entire kingdom in thorns. The scale of the Thorn Fairy’s magic was seriously bananas.”

The other six had possessed unprecedented magical powers, but the Thorn Fairy was clearly on an entirely different level. Grim’s eyes grew wide in amazement.

“And that’s not all, dude!” Ace said playfully. “Listen to this! She could also turn herself into an enormous dragon!”

“A dragon ...” Yuya stared in disbelief. “You mean like in fairy tales and stuff?!”

“What all monsters yearn to be!” Grim exclaimed.

As Yuya looked up at the statue once more, he could feel the grace and refinement of the Thorn Fairy. She held a long, thin staff with a sphere on one end and was clad in a robe with a high collar. Yuya got the impression that the simplicity of her dress was in fact a display of her immense power.

“The greatest mages to ever exist,” Ace sighed. “This academy considers the so-called Great Seven to be so important that they built these statues of them and everything.”

Text singing their praises was inscribed on each of the pedestals of these seven statues.

The Queen of Hearts

*A queen who ruled over a maze of roses
and brought the rule of law to a chaotic kingdom.
Under her strict leadership, no rose was off-color,
nor was any playing-card soldier out of step.*

The King of Beasts

*Through grit and determination,
this king of beasts overcame
his lesser claim of succession
to rule over a vast savanna.
He sought equality for all creatures—
even those once banished from the realm.*

The Sea Witch

*A compassionate sea witch who dwelled
in a grotto deep beneath the waves.
To repent for past misdeeds,
she devoted herself to helping troubled souls,
guiding even seemingly hopeless romances
to a true happy ending.*

The Sorcerer of the Sands

*A wise sorcerer of a desert kingdom
who used his keen insight to obtain
a magic lamp that granted him great power.
He supported his king by regularly offering
carefully considered words of advice.*

The Fairest Queen

*The fairest queen of all,
and one who was always diligently
striving to better herself.
She utilized the powerful magic
at her command to tirelessly pursue her ideals.*

The King of the Underworld

*The lord of the Underworld,
and guide to the wandering souls of the dead.
He carried out his fearsome duties
with diligence and care,*

motivating even the defiant to offer their aid.

The Thorn Fairy

*A fairy who reigned over a mystical mountain,
wielding magical powers that included
mastery over storms and thorns.
Proud and refined, she cherished solitude
even as she commanded her countless minions.*

“The Great Seven ...” Yuya said out loud as a chilly pit opened in his stomach. Grim’s eyes were shining, but Yuya felt more fear than admiration.

Now that he thought of it, he was pretty sure one of his nursery school teachers had read him a picture book featuring a fairy tale about a woman talking to a magic mirror. The history of the beautiful queen sounded a bit like that fairy tale. He couldn’t remember the details now, but regardless, the story Ace had just told him was no myth; in this world, it had really happened.

But the feats of these magicians were preposterous. The seven sorcerers were so powerful they were deemed special even in this world filled with magic. Yuya couldn’t begin to imagine how great their power must have been.

As he shuddered in something like terror, Grim danced around happily. “Luckyyyy! I’m so jealous. I can’t wait for *my* statue to get built as a tribute to my might!”

“Pretty cool, huh?” Ace said. Then, suddenly, his voice changed and was extremely cold and full of malice. “Not like some piddling weasel.”

“Huh?” Yuya looked over at Ace, who was convulsing with a hand over his mouth. “A-Ace? What’s wrong?”

“Pfft! Ha ha! Ah ha ha ha!” Ace burst into laughter, doubled over. “I can’t hold it back anymore! It’s too funny, I can’t breathe!”

His laughter gradually grew louder and wilder. Yuya and Grim stared at him, stunned, until finally he wiped away the tears from the corners of his eyes and looked at them.

“Come on, you’re the ones who turned orientation into a fiasco yesterday, right?” The charming boy of only moments earlier was nowhere to be found. His bright, friendly smile was more of a sneer, and the flesh of his round cheeks pushed his eyes up, distorting the heart drawn around his eye.

“You two seriously stand out.” Ace held up a finger and pointed first at Yuya. “A total normie, the perfect punch line to a disappointing joke. Every eye in the school focused on him, and he can’t use even a drop of magic.”

He turned to Grim. “A monster who wasn’t even summoned by the Dark Mirror in the first place but crashed orientation anyway and got beaten to a pulp by the housewarden.” He pointedly looked them over from head to toe before his lips curled into a smile that didn’t touch the harsh gleam in his red eyes. “You’re perfect for each other.”

Every time Ace blinked, he sent sparks of hostility flying through the air, burning the tip of Yuya’s nose. The malice spilling from the other boy was so powerful Yuya could practically hear it crackling in the air. Stunned into speechlessness, he staggered backward, and his feet caught on something. Grim. The monster’s tail was standing on end, an arrow pointing up to the sky.

“W-w-w-what are—” Grim stammered, seemingly as surprised as Yuya. “You don’t gotta be a jerk! Coming at us all of a sudden like this!”

“It’s not all of a sudden, dude.” Ace smirked. “The look on your face when they picked you up and tossed you out was hilarious! It took everything I had not to burst into laughter in the middle of the ceremony.” He dropped his gaze to the broom and bucket in Yuya’s hands. “What, neither of you got admitted, and now you’re janitors? Pretty sad.”

“Shaddup, you!” Grim shouted, enraged, the pupils of his eyes expanding, while Ace roared with laughter. “I’m gonna be a student at this school in no time!”

“Nuh-uh! No way.” Ace shook his head, firmly. “Before you try getting into the academy again, maybe you should take another crack at kindergarten? I mean, you’re both so clueless you don’t even know who the Great Seven are. Not a one of them!”

Yuya watched the exchange, despairing. If you got one word in against Ace, he would repay the favor tenfold. Yuya couldn’t see them winning

this or any other argument against the boy with the heart around his eye.

“Hnnngaaaah!” Grim stomped on the ground in frustration and beat at Yuya’s thighs. “Hey, Yu! Don’t just stand there. Give this jerk the what for!”

“Huh? Me?” Yuya panicked. “Oh, uh, I—”

“What?” Ace deftly arched an eyebrow and leaned in close. “If you got something to say, it’s a free country, you know.”

“Uh. Um. I ... Er ...” Yuya opened trembling lips. He could tell that Ace was laughing at him, almost daring him to do something.

Hilarious. Go ahead and speak then, the cherry red eyes said with a challenging glint.

Yuya’s mind went blank, and before he knew it, he was shaking his head. “I-I’m good.”

“Huh?” Ace frowned at him.

“The whole disaster at orientation, me being a disappointment.” Yuya smiled and tried to brush it all off. “Honestly, I think it’s just like you said, Ace.”

“Seriously? Come on, man! Don’t you have any pride?” Ace snorted indignantly. “Geez. You’re a total bore.” The smirk slid off his face as he clasped his hands behind his head, apparently losing interest now that Yuya wasn’t reacting as expected. “Anyway, I only started talking to you in the first place ’cause I wanted to tease you a bit. But I’m sick of that now. I’ll let you get back to picking up trash with your little monster friend.”

Yuya bobbed his head up and down and turned away from Ace and the cold look on his face. All he wanted to do was get as far away from this place and this moment as he could. “C’mon, let’s go,” he muttered, and gave Grim a push.

But the monster swatted his hand away, exclaiming, “Myuh-uh! Y-y-you ain’t walking away from me!” He leaped out in front of Ace, stomach puffed up.

“Ah!” Yuya didn’t even have the chance to shout a warning at Ace before flames were shooting from Grim’s mouth.

“Whoa!” Ace dodged the ball of fire in the nick of time. The cobblestones at his feet smoked and smoldered. “What are you *doing*?!”

“No one makes fun of Grim, master of fire!” Grim snarled. “I’ll show ya who’s boss here!”

“Ha!” Ace snorted. “You wanna throw down with *me*, shorty?”

Yuya heard whispers and murmured chatter and looked around. The students trickling toward the school were stopping and staring curiously.

“Huh? Isn’t that the monster they caught yesterday?” said a student.

“What’s going on? A fight? Against a first-year?” another asked.

“Oh, sweet! Get ’em!”

The students began jeering and cheering all around them.

“Hey? Behind the statue there, it’s that guy. What’s his name ...”

Yuya flushed when the crowd started talking about him. The chattering grew increasingly loud.

“You can’t do this!” He tried to get Grim and Ace to cool down. “The headmage told us not to cause any trouble.”

“Shut it!” Grim didn’t even look back at him. “This rude-o needs a lesson in manners!”

“You need to go back to school before you can start teaching anything, weasel!” Ace pulled something out of the pocket of his school uniform. It glittered in the morning sun.

At first, Yuya thought it was a wand, but it was way too short. He frowned. “A ... pen?”

Ace held a capped black pen with a large gem attached to the top. When he brandished it above his head, the red stone began to shine as if in response to its wielder.

Yuya felt like he’d seen something like it before. When he poked around in his memory, he realized that whatever Riddle had held in his hand the day before had glittered in a similar way.

Grim spewed another ball of fire, but a gust of wind shot forth from the shining stone and knocked the flames off course before they came anywhere near Ace. The ball of fire flew off toward the crowd of onlookers instead, who screamed and laughed in equal parts.

“Huh?” Grim was surprised and cast his fire spell three more times, but the result was the same each time. A sudden gust would blow up from one side or from above or below—whichever direction Ace’s pen happened to move—and keep the flames from reaching their target.

When Ace was left untouched by even a stray spark, Yuya was forced to a single conclusion: Ace could control the wind. The students watching in the crowd around them seemed to take all this in stride, unsurprised by the little show. It seemed you could use magic to generate wind as well as fire.

“Aw. Can’t hit me with your little fireballs?” Ace flashed them a confident grin and turned his pen toward Grim. “Take that!”

A powerful blast of air slammed into the monster and put out his fire. The force of it knocked him down and sent him tumbling across the cobblestones like a fallen acorn.

“Nnnngh. How dare you mess with my magic!” Grim pulled himself up off the ground and braced on all fours. “Get ready to eat fire!”

“That the only trick you know, shorty?” Ace taunted and waved his pen.

Flames shot forth, air currents jetted past, and Yuya gasped in shock and horror at the new trajectory of Grim’s ball of flames. It was heading straight for the statues of the Great Seven.

“Uh! Yikes! Hold up!” Ace cried, reaching out a helpless hand. “Augh, no!”

The flames slammed into the Queen of Hearts and engulfed the entire statue in the blink of an eye as the crowd of students watched, stunned.

“No way,” came a shocked murmur from somewhere.

“This is maybe very bad?!” Yuya yelped in a panic.

Grim leaped up. “I-i-i-i-it’s not my fault! Ace did it! It’s his fault for using wind magic.”

“It’s your fault! You’re the one with the fire magic!” Ace shouted. “Triple yikes. If the teachers hear out about this—”

“Come now! What’s all the commotion here?” Yuya turned around at the sound of a familiar voice.

“Gah!” someone in the crowd cried. “It’s the headmage!”

“Crap! Run!”

The students scattered like frightened rabbits. Ace tried to blend in among them and flee, but he was quickly bound by magic alongside Grim, perhaps because the pen in his hand had attracted the censure of the headmage.

Crowley waved his staff, the flames vanished, and a charred Queen of Hearts appeared. The tips of her crown crumbled and fell to the ground, ruined by the intense heat of Grim’s flames.

The headmage staggered back dramatically, the back of one hand pressed to his forehead. "It can't be," he moaned. "To *think* that our academy could house a student who would destroy the magnificent statues of the Great Seven ..."

"No, see, you've got it all wrong," Ace pleaded as he desperately shook his head, the only part of him that he could move. "It was just a teensy little accident. And I mean, it was totally the monster's fault."

"I will not tolerate excuses!" Crowley barked. "State your name and grade."

"Ummm." Ace looked anywhere but at the headmage.

"There's no point in trying to deceive me."

Ace sighed in resignation. "First year, class A. Ace Trappola."

"Mm-hmm. Ace Trappola, is it?" Crowley turned his eyes to the red-and-black ribbon tied around Ace's left arm. "From the suit painted on your face and the band around your arm, it seems that you are a member of Heartslabyul Dorm, hm? It's almost as if you were hoping to be expelled, getting yourself involved in such a serious incident so soon after starting here."

"I—please have mercy!" Ace begged.

"Ooh, yikes," Grim winced, exaggeratedly. "Not a good look, dude."

"My words are also directed at you, Grim!" Crowley thundered, and his "tough love" magic tightened around the monster.

"Hrrngh!" Grim yelped.

"And, you." The headmage now turned his stern eyes on Yuya. "You were specifically told to keep him under control. And yet this precious statue met such a terrible fate ... How could you do this?"

"I-I know, sir." Yuya hung his head. "I'm sorry."

"Honestly." Crowley looked at the contrite group and let out a sigh. "I do hope you have reflected on your actions and feel appropriately remorseful?"

"I am," Ace and Grim both muttered reluctantly.

"Are you *truly* remorseful?" he asked them, a harsh note in his voice, and this time, Yuya joined in.

"I am!" the three of them chimed.

"Very well." Crowley nodded, satisfied. "Since I am incredibly benevolent, I shall forgive you just this once. After you clean a hundred

windows as penance.”

“Huh?” Ace stared at the headmage in surprise. “Clean a hundred windows?! Does that mean me, too?”

“Naturally,” Crowley replied as he freed them from their magical bonds. “I expect you have class to attend now, Trappola, so we will defer this punishment until after school. Once classes are over, I expect the three of you to be good little boys and clean those windows together. Am I understood?”

“Yees, siiir,” Ace replied weakly as he stood up and brushed the dirt off his uniform. He twirled the pen in his hand and stared at it before nodding as if something made sense to him now. He stuffed the pen back into his pocket. “Why do I have to ... ?” he grumbled as he headed toward the school.

Crowley watched him round the bend on Main Street and disappear from sight before picking Grim up by the scruff of his neck and holding him out to Yuya. “You and Grim are to fulfill your janitorial duties,” he said, then held up a finger. “As per my previous instructions, you will clean the campus now and later wash one hundred windows with Ace. Quite a busy day of tidying for you, it seems!”

“First yesterday and now today. You got it in for us or what?!” Grim protested.

Yuya wanted to lodge the same complaint, but he stopped himself with a sigh. He wasn’t going to have any extra time to do research in the library after all. Finding the world he came from was going to have to wait a little longer, it seemed.

As soon as Crowley was gone, the ghosts came flying over.

“The headmage got really mad at us, ya know?” one told them ruefully. “Said we can’t be leaving you all on your own when you only just got here.”

“Sorry ’bout that,” another continued. “We never dreamed you’d be this bad at being janitors.”

“I’m not bad at it,” Grim growled. “I mean, I’m *not* a janitor!”

“What’re you so angry about?” the ghosts asked, and Grim thrust a fist up into the air.

“That mouthy jerk Ace was talking like I’m some kinda failure!” he complained.

“Ohhh. Is that it?” The ghosts glanced at each other and chuckled.

“Well, I gotta be honest here, it’s no wonder. I mean, you guys’re famous. You were the stars of the orientation yesterday and everything,” one ghost said.

“Ran into some of the school ghosts earlier, and they couldn’t stop blabbing about ya. Said we got a coupla real live ones this year,” said another.

“And the paintings kept boasting, like ‘I talked to that lost guy first’ and ‘I scared him first!’ Heh heh! We got ’em beat by a mile, though. We’re your roommates!”

“So people are talking about that then ...” Yuya’s hands suddenly felt heavy around the broom handle, and his shoulders slumped. Abruptly, Grim slapped his legs, and Yuya jumped. “Ow! What?”

“Why didn’t you say anything back to that stupid Ace?” Grim demanded. Standing on an upside-down bucket, arms crossed, he was just barely within striking distance of Yuya’s head and shoulders, but the eyes glaring up at him were nonetheless fierce. “That stuff he said to you was real awful. But you just grinned like an idiot. He even made fun of me ’cause of you! Shoulda socked that guy right in the kisser.”

“Socked?!” Yuya stared at Grim in disbelief. “You can’t go around punching people.”

“Whaaat?” Grim held his fists up, ducking and weaving. “Coward.”

“Now, now,” the ghosts said placatingly. “Didn’t the headmage tell you to quit making trouble?”

Grim gritted his teeth and stamped his feet, and the metal bucket beneath him wobbled and clanged against the ground. The violent sound seemed to give voice to his extreme annoyance and vexation at having lost the argument with Ace.

Yuya frowned while the ghosts bobbed around him.

“But y’know, Yu,” one of them said, “you’re never gonna make it like that.”

“Huh?” Yuya shifted his gaze from Grim to the ghosts.

“All we’re saying is nice guys don’t got no chance at this here school,” another explained.

“The headmage didn’t tell you?” the third continued. “Night Raven’s *the* top arcane academy in all of Twisted Wonderland. Study all ya want, but it don’t mean you got even a chance of getting through those gates. You get that letter of acceptance, and then the black carriage rolls up at your door. Ya hafta have magic for that—real special magic, see?”

“So why does that mean I’m never going to make it here?” Yuya asked, and the ghosts cackled, hysterically.

“This one’s a dim bulb, huh?” the first ghost asked.

“The thing is, these kids are a proud bunch, ya get me?” the second said.

“Trust me,” another added. “We’ve been keeping watch over this school for so long I can’t even remember, so we know.”

The ghosts were strangely persuasive, and Yuya was reminded of Riddle’s behavior the previous day. He’d been almost brimming with pride, and everyone else had taken this in stride, acting as though it were totally normal.

“’Bout the only thing any of ’em believe in is their own power. They don’t trust nothing else, and they expect other people’re the same. If I were being nice, I’d say they’re determined to stand on their own two feet. And if I weren’t being *nice*, well, they don’t care about anyone. Every once in a blue moon, you see a kid who’s not like that, but ...” The ghost shrugged. “As a rule of thumb, you better not expect anyone to come digging you out if you get into a jam.”

“*Specially* anyone from a different dorm! These kids’re pretty territorial, y’know? Extra hard on outsiders.”

“Yeah, that. You wouldn’t *believe* the fights we’ve seen.”

“Although, y’know, we never saw anyone set the Great Seven on fire before!” The ghosts laughed as one.

Territorial. Fights. Hard on outsiders. Yuya grew pale.

“So, like ...” He paused to pull together his thoughts. “You mean, magic is something special even here in this world?”

“Depends on the species.” The ghosts looked Yuya over and thought for a minute. “I guess, right. Humans like you, maybe one in ten can use magic? And most of them, I mean, they can basically move a cup onto a table or light a fire without a match. Real small stakes. It’s a rare one who’s got enough magic to get into Night Raven College.”

Surprised, Yuya looked over at Grim. The monster was still on top of the bucket, head thrown back in an extremely smug fashion.

Ever since he'd first encountered Grim the day before, he'd felt like he was pretty full of himself, and now it all clicked into place. It was probably the magic and Grim's obvious command of it. Monsters and humans no doubt lived different lives, but even still, setting the large Mirror Chamber ablaze wasn't normal for this world either. Yuya understood on a keenly painful level how powerful the students in this place were, given that they had simply stood back and watched the whole thing unfold with amusement.

"You do whatever you're told, like a good little boy, and you won't last a week here. Even more so since you can't use magic. These kids'll be extra hard on you—you can be sure of that," the ghosts continued.

"Push comes to shove, you gotta let 'em have it. Don't worry. Sure, you ain't got magic, but you've got fists at least!"

"Right, yeah!" Grim cheered. "Next time we see that Ace, we'll beat him black and blue!"

"Nice." The ghosts grinned at each other. "You just gotta! For real, you gotta!"

"I can't," Yuya muttered, too quietly for Grim and the ghosts to hear in their excitement. "I'm not that kind of person."

The others looked at him dubiously, perhaps noticing how extremely pale he was.

"Hey, ya big baby," Grim snapped. "You can't go giving up before you even get started."

"I'm not going to get started!" Yuya cried. "I told you before, I've never been in a fight. Not once in my whole life."

"Not once?" Grim gaped at him. "You've really never, ever fought even once?!"

Although Grim looked stunned at his confession, Yuya had a harder time wrapping his mind around Grim's perspective of picking fights nonstop, as he had been since the day before.

Yuya was bad at confrontation. Just the thought of having words with someone caused his heart to leap up into his throat and made it hard to breathe. The anguish he felt at the idea was closer to disgust than pain.

Did anyone actually *like* fighting? It seemed to him that no one in their right mind could honestly enjoy giving themselves up to danger and the general exhaustion of attack. Ace raring for a fight, Grim ready to take him on at the drop of a hat, the crowd of people cheering them on—it all seemed like a bad joke to Yuya.

“No, no, no.” Grim shook his head firmly. “You can’t have never fought once. I mean, how are you even still alive?”

The ghosts also wore expressions of surprise on their faces.

“C’mon! You’re a teenage boy and all. You *musta* got into it with a friend or something.”

“Yeah, zactly.” Another ghost nodded, a dreamy smile on his face. “Aah, sweet youth. Hotheaded, hot-blooded, picking fights and patching it up. Making best friends even better! All that’s decades behind us now, though, huh?”

“Oh.” Yuya turned his eyes to the ground feeling awkward. “I don’t really have any friends.”

A silence fell over both the ghosts and Grim.

“You don’t have any friends?” one ghost finally asked.

Yuya shook his head. “I mean, we might end up fighting, so ...”

Getting close to someone made it more likely that he’d clash with someone. In which case, the best thing to do was to keep a reasonable distance from everyone so that he never had a difference of opinion with anyone. He was always hyperaware of the potential for conflict, which led him to avoid any real connections. This was how intensely afraid he was of quarreling with people, which was why he had never had a true friend—not during high school or at any time before.

“Isn’t that sorta putting the cart before the horse?” The ghosts looked at each other incredulously.

“Unbelievable.”

“But you’re so young!”

“It’s not like I’ve met anyone I wanted to be friends with, anyway,” Yuya told them, unfazed. “I just don’t want to fight.”

He didn’t have any hobbies, and he wasn’t particularly passionate about anything. Plus, the root of all conflict was ambition and desire. If he found something he couldn’t let go of, he would no doubt be forced to fight someone to protect that thing.

“I mean, I don’t even like to see fighting,” he continued. “I get so scared. My heart starts pounding like it’s going to break right out of my chest.”

The only reason they’d managed to chase off the ghosts last night was because of Grim. *Yuya* hadn’t been able to do much of anything; Grim had been the one to face them. *Yuya* was only too aware of that. He’d been lucky. Things had just happened to work out yesterday. The best thing was not actually getting into a fight to start with.

“I’m begging you, Grim,” *Yuya* pleaded. “Don’t pick any more fights. Please. My life gets shorter just watching.”

“Uhh?” Grim raised a dubious eyebrow at him. “Come on, you can’t be serious. You’re a coward! A weakling!”

“I’m just regular!” *Yuya* cried. “Everybody hates fighting. You’re the weird one, Grim. Your fuse is way too short.”

“Reeeegular? No one’s gonna respect you, talking like that. Shape up, human!”

“Say what you want,” *Yuya* replied. “This is how I am, so ...”

“Hmm.” The ghosts watched *Yuya* and Grim with amusement. “But the way you talk with ol’ Grim here, you sound pretty friendly.”

He gasped. Now that they mentioned it, it *was* way easier for him to talk with Grim than other people. This was maybe the first time he’d spoken so freely and comfortably with someone outside of his family.

“Maybe because it doesn’t feel like talking with a person?” *Yuya* said.

“True.” A ghost nodded. “And he don’t look like a person neither.”

“So then, the two of youse make a good team, huh?” another noted.

“We’re not a team,” Grim snarled. “He’s my hench-human. A real delicate flower, high-maintenance hench-human.” He sighed heavily in a way that was at odds with his appearance, as if the weight of the world were on his shoulders. He seemed to have entirely forgotten that he himself was the reason that the headmage was angry with them.

A bell rang in the distance, no doubt the signal for the start of class. The ghosts lifted their faces.

“Whoopsy! We got all carried away chatting,” one of them said. “Listen, word of advice since you’re gonna be hanging around the academy now. Watch out for them students. Remember, we warned you.”

“Anyway! Better get back to work!” another said. “We’re all supposed to head on over there and clean since they gotta do some emergency repairs on the Queen of Hearts here.”

The ghosts pointed an apologetic Yuya toward the castle Ace had disappeared into. He’d passed through it with Crowley the night before—the main building of Night Raven College.

He walked down Main Street with Grim, and the ghosts and climbed the stone steps leading up to the school. There was no hint of the sea air he’d sniffed the day before. Maybe his nose had gotten used to it.

A pleasant breeze blew, making Grim’s ears flutter gently. Yuya stared up at the gray walls and black roof under the bright sunlight and almost winced at how imposing the building was. The longer he looked at it, the bigger it seemed.

According to the ghosts, more than eight hundred students were enrolled at Night Raven College. This was about the same as or maybe a little more than the number of students at Yuya’s own school. He was a little surprised that there were so many since he’d assumed that such a prestigious academy would only admit an elite few. But apparently, this school had four grades, one more than at Yuya’s.

“It’s pretty standard for an arcane academy,” the ghosts told him.

He’d heard of high schools on a four-year system overseas in his world. He figured it was something like that and nodded in understanding as he grew short of breath climbing the long staircase.

“Although most of fourth year’s fieldwork,” another ghost noted. “So those guys’re hardly ever on campus. Don’t even have rooms at the dorms no more. They’re scattered all over the world doing live-in practicums.”

The third ghost sighed. “September’s always so sad, every year. All those goodbyes.”

“Hm? Dorm rooms?” Grim asked. He stopped and set his bucket down. “So the other guys live here, too?”

“Mm-hmm.” The ghosts nodded. “Each dorm has its own special building.”

“What?!” Grim shouted. “I coulda been living large instead of in a run-down mess of a building? I hate that Ramshackle Dorm!”

The ghosts cheered. “Ramshackle Dorm!”

“Ooh, I like it. It has real charm,” one said.

“Yeah, yeah. Perfect for our historical home.” The ghosts laughed. “Now that we got a cool name, our building’s number one!”

“Rent: zero,” one of the ghosts said. “Immediate occupancy okay. Comes with yard, furniture, and ghosts!”

“Could do without that last one,” Grim grumbled.

Ignoring him, one of the ghosts pointed. “Take a look behind you.”

Yuya and Grim both turned around. After climbing all those stairs, they now had an excellent view of the campus.

“That there at the end of Main Street? Those are the main gates.” The ghost indicated the large iron gates visible up ahead. “They’re mostly for guests. The students live on campus, so they don’t usually use ’em.”

The next ghost pointed much farther to the left.

“And you see that building with the round roof? That’s the Hall of Mirrors. It’s where they keep the mirrors that lead to the dorms.”

“Mirrors?” Yuya parroted.

“Oh dear.” The ghosts frowned. “Ya never heard of a mirror? Real useful doodads. Ya can use ’em to make yourself look nice, and the extra-fancy ones’ll take you to different places.”

“No, I know what a mirror is ... I think.” The Dark Mirror yesterday had been a surprise for Yuya, and it seemed like it wasn’t the only mysterious mirror in this world.

The ghosts continued to point out the different places on campus and give them a brief overview of the facilities. The library, the shop, the greenhouse. A large lawn for sports, and another separate stadium for tournaments.

Yuya looked out at it all from his position on the sunny hill and desperately tried to cram the information into his brain. Night Raven College was big, and he couldn’t go getting lost. He hadn’t forgotten the ghosts’ warning about no one coming to his rescue if he got in trouble.



YUYA, GRIM, AND THE GHOSTS got down to business cleaning the building that was far larger than he'd imagined. Art room, music room, cafeteria, lecture halls of various sizes, closets, washrooms—it went on and on. It didn't make any sense. He could only assume that the inside somehow had more rooms than what he'd seen from the outside.

Because he'd had to carry Grim after the monster just stopped moving halfway through the day, he was completely wiped out by the time the last bell rang.

"I'm so tired," Grim whined, hanging limply over Yuya's shoulder. "Let's go home."

"We can't," Yuya said as he took several deep breaths. "We still have to clean the windows, remember?"

Before his eyes was the door the ghosts had led them to: the classroom where Ace supposedly was.

"You are a stupidly serious hench-human," Grim told him.

Deep down, Yuya also just wanted to go back to Ramshackle Dorm. It would have been so much easier to go home and go to sleep. But when he recalled Crowley's disappointed face, he really couldn't bring himself to go against the headmage's orders.

"Okay, then," the ghost said as they faded out of existence. "Play nice with the Heartslabyul kid."

Yuya always felt a little nervous going into a classroom that wasn't his own. He swallowed hard, mustered up his courage, and opened the door.

"Um. Is Ace Trappola here?" he timidly asked the boy standing closest to the doorway.

He had shiny navy-colored hair and a clear, open face. Like Ace, he had a card suit drawn around his right eye, a black spade. "Ace?" the boy asked, shaking his head. "Sorry, I haven't gotten to know everyone by name yet. What's he look like?"

"Umm." Yuya thought for a second. "He has a heart mark on his face."

"He's super mean!" Grim interjected, sticking out his tongue over Yuya's shoulder.

"Oh, that guy." The boy nodded, and Yuya wondered which comment had stirred his memory. "He already left."

"He left?!"

"Yeah. He was yelling real loud a second ago—oh, wait! There he is." The boy poked his head out of the classroom window, and Yuya followed suit to find a slender figure up ahead in the hallway with hair a color that melted into the evening sun. It was definitely Ace.

"Hey, man! You got visitors!" the boy shouted, and Ace looked back over his shoulder. And immediately broke into a run.

"H-huh?" Yuya gaped. "Wait! Hey, is he maybe—"

"He's tryin' to ditch us!" Grim shouted and leaped down from Yuya's shoulder, his hackles up. "Stop right there! Like it or not, you're comin' with us!"

"No way I'm getting stuck on window duty on the first day of school!" Ace yelled as he glanced back at them and waved a genial hand. "You two got this! Please and thank you!"

Enraged, Grim chased after him as the students still at school peered curiously out into the hallway from their classrooms.

Yuya felt dizzy at the thought of another fight like the one from that morning. "I gotta do something. We're gonna get in trouble with the headmage *again*!" he moaned.

"The headmage?!" the boy with the spade mark yelped as he flinched for some reason. "That would be very bad. We have to stop them. Come on!" He charged down the hall, and Yuya chased after him.

The boy pulled out a pen as he ran and muttered to himself, “Stop them, stop them ... But how? Body slam, grab their legs? No. Use rope to tie them up? Or a cage? But then what shape ...”

“You punk!” Grim howled at Ace. “This time for sure, I’m turning you into charcoal!”

“Please! Hurry!” Yuya begged, desperately. “Anything if it’ll stop them!”

“Eeeah!” the boy shouted, as if shaking off his doubts. “I summon thee, cauldron!”

The area around Ace fell into darkness.

“Hngh!” Ace grunted as he was slammed flat on the ground, crushed beneath a giant black pot that had abruptly dropped out of nowhere to land on top of him. He kicked and flailed, pinned to the spot. “Hey?! What is this? It weighs a ton!”

“Myah ha ha!” Grim doubled over laughing. “Lookit you! You’re squashed flat like a frog that got run over by a car! Nyah nyah!”

“Did you do that?” Yuya asked.

“Yeah,” the boy said as he scratched his head awkwardly. “I went and pulled the cauldron out again.”

“Thank you so much! You really saved us.”

“It was the least I could do,” the boy said. “I don’t know the whole situation here, but I do know you don’t want the headmage getting mad at you.”

“If you don’t know what’s going on, then you should keep your nose out of it!” Ace finally succeeded in crawling out from under the cauldron and glared at Yuya, causing Yuya’s heart to stutter. “Man, you jerk. A hundred windows? You two coulda just banged them out yourselves. I mean, you’re the janitors, aren’t you?!”

“But, um, we were told to finish up before supper,” Yuya mumbled. “The headmage might think of an even worse punishment if we don’t get all the windows cleaned.”

“You have to wash a hundred windows?” The spade boy stared at them in disbelief. “We only just started school. What could you have done to get a punishment like that already?”

“Kind of burned the Queen of Hearts statue a little ...” Yuya’s voice grew quieter with each word until it trailed off entirely.

“You damaged a statue of the Great Seven?!” The boy leaped back, stunned. “No wonder he flew off the handle at you! After you managed to get into *this* school, how could you get in trouble on the very first day?!”

“Oh, shut up.” Ace clicked his tongue. “Anyway, who are you again?”

“My name is Deuce Spade.”

“Oh, right. Right.” Ace bobbed his head up and down. “You’re the guy who was all hyped in the dorm yesterday.”

“Hmph.” Deuce sniffed, indignantly. “You could at least remember your classmates’ names.”

Ace pointedly side eyed him. “Like you remembered mine, genius?”

“Hngh.” Deuce swallowed hard. “Anyway! You shouldn’t shirk an order from the headmage. Get to work.”

“Yeah, yeah. Message received. Fine, let’s go bang out the windows already.” Ace sighed, loudly. “Why is this happening to me ... C’mon, losers—huh?” He whirled his head, looking to either side of Yuya. “Where’d that dusty hair ball go?”

“Huh?” Yuya furrowed his brow as he looked around, too. “Hey, you’re right. Grim’s gone.”

“Heh heh!” came a smug laugh from a ways off. Yuya quickly turned his eyes toward the sound and spotted Grim standing at the end of the hallway, at the top the stairs. He clicked his tongue at the flabbergasted Yuya.

“See ya, suckers!” he shouted. “The whole thing was Ace’s fault, so Ace can clean the stupid windows!”

“That little—! He used me to get away!” Ace growled, slapping Deuce’s shoulder. “Hey, Juice!”

“Juice?” Deuce stared at him, confused. “You mean me?! My name is *Deuce*!”

“Whatever. Help me catch that fur ball.”

“Why me?!”

“’Cause that dodo there can’t use magic, so he’s out.” Ace rolled his eyes at Yuya. “Unless you want the headmage down your throat, it’s you and me.”

Deuce gritted his teeth. “Fine.” He followed Ace through the hall and disappeared down the stairs chasing after Grim. Neither boy looked back at Yuya, a clear sign of how utterly useless they considered him.

For a second, he wondered if he shouldn't just go back to the dorm by himself, but he was too scared about what might happen if he did. In the end, he simply trailed after the others.

Ace and Deuce had cornered Grim in the cafeteria, an enormous space with rows and rows of long tables and chairs. Sunlight poured in through large windows, coloring the hall a warm red. A heavy chandelier overhead shone with an orange light, as if to draw out the twilight.

Yuya joined the other two boys in staring up at the swinging light fixture. Grim was clinging to the decorative chains.

"Hair ball!" Ace yelled. "You get down here right now!"

"Not a chance, human!" Grim laughed. "Come on, catch me if you can!"

Ghosts in chef hats—Yuya guessed they were cafeteria workers—drifted out of the kitchen into the hall, likely wondering what the ruckus was about. They shuddered and gasped when they saw Grim hanging from the chandelier. "Is that the monster everyone's talking about?!" a ghost gasped.

"No fair climbing up to where we can't reach, you coward!" Ace yelled.

"It's just plain smarts!" Grim taunted as he turned and waggled his backside at them. "You're a buncha dunces is all!"

"Come down here and say that!" Deuce challenged, glaring ferociously and looking like an entirely different person in his anger.

"Shoot your mouth off while you can, you little weasel." Ace shouted, his mouth trembling with rage as he tightened his grip on his pen. "Just wait. I'm gonna knock you into next week!"

"Stop!" Yuya managed to squeak, when the boys raised their hands, ready to fire their magic at any second.

A sternly silent Deuce and an icy cold Ace craned their necks to look at him. "What."

Stop fighting. That's all he wanted to say, but the words clung to the inside of his throat, and he couldn't push even one word out. It felt like he'd swallowed a thin plastic bag, the words crumpled and blocking his airways, nearly suffocating him.

Stop fighting. I've had enough of these arguments. Can't you find a better way of doing things? That's what he wanted to tell them, and yet

the words refused to come out.

While he hesitated, the words grew sodden in his mouth and eventually melted away.

“Seriously, what? If you got something to say, then spit it out!” an annoyed Ace rebuked the silent Yuya. If nothing else, waiting for Yuya to speak had seemingly had a calming effect on Ace as he looked at his hand, then at Deuce’s. He was clearly picturing what would happen if they both let loose with magic indoors at the same time, and it was giving him pause. “But, uh. Huh. Could turn into a whole thing if we went all in on the magic in here. We gotta think of another way to catch Grim.”

“A way to catch Grim ...” Deuce began muttering to himself again. “Catch, catch, catch ... We can’t reach him, we haven’t learned flying magic yet ... Catch, wedge, pinch ...” He jerked his face up with a gasp. “That’s it!”

“Oh! You come up with something?” Ace cried, excitedly, looking at Deuce. “Hang on. Why are you turning your magical pen on me?”

The shiny, black fountain pen Deuce used to cast his magic was thrust squarely at Ace. “I’ll just throw you up there!” he said matter-of-factly.

“What?!” Ace and Yuya cried out simultaneously.

Ace tried to run, but it was too late. His body floated up into the air and flipped upside down. He was helpless to resist, like a handkerchief caught on a tree. This was not a good look for him.

“Put me down, you dodo!” he cried. “Quit it! For real!”

“Yeah, yes, right!” Yuya agreed, panicking. “Deuce, you really ought to —”

“Hiyah! Fighting scream!” Deuce tightened his grip on his pen, a serious look on his face. “You make sure to grab him tight!”

“No, no, I can’t,” Ace protested. “Stop! Abort. Abort!”

“Go!” Deuce flung out his arm, and Ace shot up toward Grim.

“Bwaaaaah!” Ace’s scream echoed through the cafeteria.

“Myaaaaah!” yowled Grim.

A horrible, earsplitting cacophony drowned out every other sound in the hall, louder than all the dishes at the biggest restaurant in town all crashing down onto the floor at the same time.

Yuya stood rooted to the spot, mouth hanging open at the shocking sight before him, so mesmerized that he didn’t even think to plug his ears, dizzy

in the face of such a nightmare.

Ace had crashed into the chandelier and shattered it into a million pieces.

“The chandelier!” the ghost chefs were screaming somewhere, though it sounded far off through the ringing in Yuya’s ears.

Feet crunched against the fragments of glass, scattering them and sending them clattering against the floor. Ace marched out of the cloud of dust that accompanied the chandelier’s fall from the ceiling and walked over to Yuya and Deuce, rubbing his backside. He was scowling fiercely, but he appeared to be okay.

“Man, I thought that was the end of me!” he said. “What were you *thinking?!?*”

Deuce averted his eyes awkwardly as he mumbled, “I admit I hadn’t considered the landing part.”

“You complete and total moron!” Ace snarled. “You got rocks in your head or what?!”

“Where’s Grim?” Yuya asked, glancing around the pile of glass, but he saw no sign of the monster. Then a gray fur blanket stretched out beneath a chair off to one side caught his eye. Grim must have been knocked down when he flew into Ace. He ran over and picked him up.

“Nnngh.” Grim’s mouth hung open loosely, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He had been knocked unconscious.

Meanwhile, Ace and Deuce were arguing loudly.

“Idiot! Stupid, dunce, absolute dodo!” Ace howled.

“It’s not like *you* had any ideas, Ace!” Deuce shot back.

“Having no ideas is waaaaay better than having the bizarre idea of *throwing* an actual person! And, like, what are you going to do about *that?*” Ace pointed at the shattered chandelier. “If the headmage finds out about this—”

“If I find out about what?” came a voice.

All three boys whirled around. “H-Headmage!” they gasped.

Crowley was standing in the cafeteria doorway, chef ghosts flying around behind him. It seemed they had alerted the headmage to the situation.

“Boys. What exactly is the meaning of this?” The wings attached to Crowley’s coat looked as though they were standing on end. Yuya

reflexively took a step back at the powerful aura of wrath hanging over the headmage.

It had been one thing after the other since he had arrived the day before, and each time Crowley had sighed in exasperation, bemoaned the facts, and been surprised by the events. But this was the first time Yuya had seen him so angry.

“Oh ...” Crowley’s pale lips trembled. “The cafeteria ... chandelier ...”

“It’s not what it looks like, headmage!” Deuce cried, panicked. “It’s ... Um, this is—”

“It wasn’t me!” Ace interrupted. “It was Deuce! And Grim. It was all their fault.”

“Quiet!” Crowley barked. “First, you burn the Queen of Hearts statue, and now you destroy this precious chandelier? I can bear it no longer. I have never encountered such terrible students before.” He took a deep breath and slammed his staff against the floor. The cold *clack* echoed through the dining hall. “I cannot turn a blind eye to this. You are both expelled!”

“Whaaaaaat?!” Ace and Deuce shrieked.

“Yu and Grim!” Crowley turned to look at them. “You are also to leave immediately!”

“No!” Yuya gasped, still cradling the unconscious Grim. He’d found a place to live and lost it again in a single day.

Before he could start to beg for forgiveness, however, Deuce was racing over to the headmage.

“Please! Please! Anything but that!” Deuce howled, practically in tears. His face was scrunched up so that the confident eyebrows that usually made him look so cool and collected were pulled down low, creating an impression of desperation. He looked ready to drop to his knees on the glass-covered floor. “I’m begging you. I can’t be expelled from this school. I have so much to do here!”

“That is unfortunate,” Crowley told him. “But you have only yourself to blame for your foolish behavior.”

“I’ll pay for damages if you let me stay!” Deuce wailed.

“Damages?” Crowley echoed, miffed. “That chandelier is no mere light fixture. It is a *magic* chandelier. Its candles are powered by a magical energy source, enchanted so that they will burn for eternity.”

The three boys looked at the object they had broken. Brackets like the antlers of a deer stretched out from the large chandelier, embedded with countless bits of brilliant glass, glittering like morning dew. Only moments earlier, the candles had covered the cafeteria in a warm blanket of light. Now the chandelier was split in two on its axis, a mere shadow of its former glory.

“It was created for us by a legendary artificer a hundred years ago. Possibly their finest creation. It was one of the academy’s most prized treasures. Considering its historical value, I would estimate its worth to be no less than a billion thaumarks.”

“A-a billion thaumarks?!” Deuce cried. “There’s no way I can pay that.”

Were thaumarks the unit of currency here? Judging from Deuce’s reaction and the way the color drained from Ace’s face, Yuya understood that whatever a thaumark was, a billion of them was an enormous sum of money.

If *they* couldn’t cover the damages, then he had zero chance of being able to, given that he didn’t even own any clothes. He racked his brain frantically, searching for some other solution.

“Oh!” he cried in sudden realization. “Right! Magic! Can’t you fix it with magic or something?”

“Y-yeah! Yes!” Ace smiled, awkwardly. “We still hardly know any magic at all, but I’m sure with your magical talent, sir, you could snap your fingers and fix it right up!”

“I would expect such talk from Yu, young Ace. But you also appear to have failed to grasp the boundaries of what magic can and cannot do,” Crowley sighed, shaking his head as he pressed a hand to his forehead. “Magic is not a panacea. Some things are simply impossible, and any magic carries with it certain risks. Magic is no wishing well, there to grant your heart’s every desire.”

Crowley turned his back to the boys and poked at the mountain of chandelier debris with his staff, possibly looking for something amid the glass.

“Aah,” he said sadly and crouched down. Reverently, he scooped up what he’d found and wrapped it in a black handkerchief. Sitting atop the fabric was a gem about the size of a fist, broken clean in half.

“Behold. This precious magestone—the figurative heart of any magical artifact—is broken. Without its magestone, the chandelier is beyond repair. Even if we were to restore its appearance with magic, it could not light up the room the way it once did. Both candle and flame used the magestone as their source of power.”

The pale-peach stone rolled slightly on the black handkerchief. It must have been quite beautiful in its original state, and the cracks that marred its delicate cut were painful to look at. Magic seemed like the only way to potentially put the two halves back together, but now that Crowley had told them that even magic could not perform that miracle, they were completely out of cards to play.

“Cripes,” Deuce groaned, and covered his face with his hands. “No ... No! How can this be?! After I *finally* managed to get into Night Raven College ... How am I going to tell my mother?!”

Yuya and Ace were forced into silence.

Crowley opened his mouth again, abruptly, as though something had just occurred to him. Perhaps there was still hope for them.

“Ah! But there may yet be a way,” he said.

“Huh?!” Deuce yanked his face up.

Ace shoved him aside and pressed in on the headmage. “What is it, this way of yours?!”

“The magestone that powered this chandelier was excavated from the Enchanted Mine,” Crowley explained. “It may be possible to obtain a magestone with similar properties there.”

“And if we found a new magestone?” Yuya asked hopefully.

“It would be possible to repair the chandelier,” Crowley agreed.

“I’ll go and find one!” Deuce declared immediately.

“But the mines were closed quite some time ago,” the headmage cautioned. “There may no longer be any magestones to find.”

“I’ll go and look, if there’s even the slightest chance!” Deuce insisted.

Ace and Yuya both bobbed their heads up and down. Yuya had absolutely no idea where this mine was or what it would be like, but like Deuce said, if there was even the slightest chance of getting out of this mess, he was willing to take it.

“Very well, then. I will suspend your expulsion for a single day.” Crowley held up a finger and repeated, “One day only. The Dark Mirror

will allow you to travel to the Enchanted Mine instantly. I shall wait until the date changes to see if you are able to return with a replacement.”

“Thank you very much for this opportunity!” Deuce said.

“Please keep in mind, however,” Crowley continued, “that I will be forced to ask you to leave the academy should you fail to bring me a magestone.”

Deuce clenched his hands into tight fists. “Yes, sir,” he said, through gritted teeth. “We will absolutely restore the chandelier.”



WHEN YUYA OPENED HIS EYES, he was standing in a quiet wood, enveloped in the light spilling out from the Dark Mirror.

“How did this turn into such a giant hassle?” Grim shouted, making the leaves on the trees around him flutter. He’d been complaining ever since he’d woken up and Yuya had explained the situation to him.

“Look, weasel!” Ace snapped. “This is all *your* fault.”

“Actually, I think it’s *your* fault, Ace,” Deuce interjected. “You were the one who ran away to start with.”

“Sure, Ace is no saint here,” Grim agreed. “But you threw him at me. You’re on the hook, too, Deuce.”

“Wha—!” Deuce glared at him. “Says the monster that climbed onto the chandelier!”

The evening sun that poured into the woods was a fiery red, carving out deep shadows around the trees that were more threatening than simple darkness. The lazy branches beckoned lazily, urging them farther into the forest. Yuya could sense the presence of birds and other small creatures, but they were all hiding in silence, perhaps afraid of this group of interlopers.

The disturbing quiet and the eyes of invisible animals set Yuya on edge. Not to mention that Grim, Deuce, and Ace had not stopped arguing once since they had left the cafeteria, and just being near them was exhausting.

“Ah, there’s a cottage over there!” he cried, pointing to a structure by the side of the river. “Maybe someone’s home. They might know something about the magestones.”

He ran toward the small house as if fleeing his companions, but when he knocked on the door, no one answered. When he looked at the building more closely, he saw the roof and walls were covered in moss and the windows overrun with vines. He gave the wooden door a gentle push, and it opened easily.

“Huh. So it’s empty?” Ace asked, peering in from behind him. “The place is a total wreck. I seriously doubt anyone lives here.”

The inside of the house was dark and in poor shape indeed. The room was thick with spiderwebs, and it was clear no one had stepped inside in quite some time.

As he examined the furniture, Yuya got the feeling that something was off somehow. The table was very small, as were the chairs lying on their sides on the floor—seven in total, all in the same style. He wondered if they had been made for children and squinted to get a better look at the place.

There was still a pot on the hearth, large enough to feed more than a few people. The shelves were cluttered with a random assortment of dishes and cutlery. The kitchen must have been bustling, full of life, back when people still lived there.

Yuya was staring at the pot, now white with dust, and letting his thoughts wander to the cottage’s former residents when he suddenly heard Deuce’s voice off in the distance.

“Hey! I found the entrance to the mine!”

Yuya walked over to Deuce, who was standing in front of a large hole in the face of the mountain. A narrow passage led into the rock, almost like it was being drawn into the hole, and it was so dark he could only see a few meters ahead.

“If we’re gonna find a magestone, it’ll be in there.” Ace pulled out the flashlights he’d brought along for this reason and handed one each to Deuce and Yuya. With nothing but these small circles of light to guide them, the group started into the mine.

The tunnel was wider than Yuya had imagined, and the air was chilly. He could hear water trickling somewhere.

“It’s all damp and clammy and dark and scary,” Grim muttered. “Kinda like Ramshackle Dorm.”

“Ramshackle Dorm?” Ace frowned, confused.

“Oh. That’s the building Crowley’s letting us stay in,” Yuya said, hesitantly. He felt nervous talking to Ace for some reason.

Deuce looked back at them from where he was walking up ahead, a puzzled expression on his face. “Dorm? You’re living on campus, too?”

“And, like, what *are* you anyway?” Ace demanded. “Where’d you come from?”

Yuya explained his odd situation as they advanced down the rocky path, heels clacking.

“Another world?” Ace and Deuce exclaimed in unison when Yuya was finished.

“I didn’t even know there were other worlds,” Ace said, eyebrows high on his forehead.

“Me neither,” Deuce agreed. “First I’ve heard of it.”

“Okay, then. What if we don’t find a magestone, and you get chased off campus. What then?” Ace turned his flashlight on Yuya, questioning.

Yuya squinted at the light. All he could offer in response was a feeble smile.

“What ...” Ace grimaced. “If I’d known all that, I’d have—”

“Shh!” Deuce interrupted sharply. “Did you hear that?”

At first, they thought it was the sound of the wind, the rumble of air as it slipped between the rocks and scraped up against them, but they could hear something else mixed in with it.

“Is it getting louder?” Deuce whispered.

Unnnnh. Unh.

It was a groan. Something was groaning.

Just as Yuya came to this realization, he saw a dim light ahead, where the corridor branched off. The disturbing purple light flickered and grew larger, approaching Yuya and the others.

Plsh, plsh, plsh.

He heard liquid splashing, like droplets landing wetly on the cold rock.

Plsh, plsh, plsh.

The sound went on and on, planting seeds of fear in his heart.

“Hey, guys?” Grim said, nervously. “What is *that*?”

The source of the splashing revealed itself slowly, and Yuya stared, stunned. He had no idea what he was looking at.

“No give.”

An enormous mass of dirt shuddered. It held a pickax and a lantern. It had hands and a body—but no face. In place of a head, it had a floating, spherical ink bottle. The black liquid inside oozed like coal tar and dripped slowly, drop after drop, out from a crack in the glass.

The mass of dirt groaned like it was in pain. “Shone. Sh. Shhh. Stooone.”

While Yuya and his comrades gaped, the mass of dirt brandished its pickax. “Stones aaare miiiiine!”

“Aaaaah!” Deuce dropped and rolled away to dodge the sharp end of the pickax as the blade sliced into the metal tracks at his feet like they were soft butter.

“What in the—?!” he cried out, still flat on his backside. “Seriously? What is that—a dirt monster?!”

The pickax whooshed through the air toward Yuya, and he glued himself to the rock face of the tunnel wall, just barely avoiding the blow. “How would I know?!” he cried wildly. “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“No one told me about no dirt monster!” Grim shrieked as he jumped to one side with Ace. He launched a fireball from his mouth, but it was swallowed up by the black fluid and snuffed out. “I-I can’t believe my magic isn’t working!”

“Get back, you giant dodo!” Ace blasted the creature with his wind magic, but like Grim’s flames, it was quietly absorbed.

“Get out ... Get ouuuut!” the monster roared.

While it was focused on Grim and Ace, Deuce hurriedly got to his feet. He readjusted his grip on his flashlight, ready to start running in the opposite direction from the monster, and then abruptly called out, “Ah! A magestone!”

Yuya followed Deuce’s gaze and saw a glint of something catching the light farther down the tunnel. A glittering gem, half-buried in the stone, so big that he could sense from just a glance that it was special. Even from afar, it was so beautiful that he stopped and stared in awe, almost forgetting where he was.

“Hey, you dolt!” Ace roared, angrily. “Focus! Giant dirt monster!”

Deuce turned and braced himself for a fight. He was glaring at the magical pen he held in both hands, and his lips began to move as he muttered something.

Ace shot him a look as if to say they did not have the time for him to do whatever it was he was doing and cast his wind magic at the monster once more. The pickax easily knocked the spell aside, turning it into a whirlwind that grazed the ends of Deuce's hair. When he danced out of the way of the mini tornado, a flash flood gushed out in all directions from the tip of his magical pen.

"Yikes!" Ace cried, leaping out of harm's way.

Deuce gritted his teeth in vexation. "Be careful, you jerk!"

"Right back atcha!" Ace snarled. "Can't you control that thing?!"

The air between them crackled, an argument just waiting to erupt again.

"Ace! Deuce! Come on!" Yuya shouted.

Grim was already sprinting out of the tunnel ahead of them. The three boys desperately chased after his furry rounded back.

The moans of the monster and the chill of the air closed in around them.

"It's gonna get us!" Grim wailed.

Yuya gasped for air. His chest hurt. His throat was sticky with thirst. Every breath was a fight. He toppled forward, half-falling into each step, but he somehow kept himself upright and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other as quickly as he could.

He wasn't the only one. They were all panting and wheezing and groaning. He wouldn't have been surprised if one of them had simply collapsed.

"Stones are miiiiine!" A roar ripped through the air, almost deafening them.

"Cripes!" Deuce waved his magical pen wildly. "I summon thee, cauldron!"

A heavy *thud* echoed in the tunnel. Yuya looked back over his shoulder. The same massive pot that had previously fallen from the sky to crush Ace was now blocking the narrow, curving passage.

"Unnh! Unnnaaaaaah!" came a ferocious roar from the other side of the barrier.

The monster howled in fury, but before long they heard a slithering dragging sound, and they could no longer sense the creature's presence.

Yuya stared at the cauldron and dropped to his knees as if in prayer, while Grim, Deuce, and Ace flopped back onto the ground, their chests heaving. They were all too winded to speak for a while.

Finally, Ace raised his hoarse voice to make himself heard over all the panting. “That monster was a total gross-out! What was it?”

“No idea.” Deuce shook his head, weakly. “It was no normal ghost, that’s for sure.”

Grim managed a hint of a nod. “Ghosts aren’t black, and they definitely ain’t as scary as whatever *that* was.”

The ghosts who’d come out of the walls at Yuya yesterday had been scary, true, but he figured that was more due to the surprise of encountering ghosts for the first time rather than there being anything inherently terrifying about them. Sure, their love of pranks was a bit of an issue, but after speaking with them in the light of day, he’d felt almost fond of the funny little guys.

The monster in the tunnel, though—that thing inspired real terror in him. His arms were still covered in goose bumps, and he rubbed them with a shudder.

He wondered how he had known that the headless creature was a threat to his life the second he saw it. Chills had run up his spine as he felt a powerful, instinctive loathing of the black liquid dripping from the massive bulk. The way it looked. That voice. Just remembering them made the contents of his stomach churn.

“Can’t have enough lives going up against a thing like that.” Ace got to his feet and glanced at the cauldron up ahead. He seemed to be considering something. He looked back. The entrance to the mine wasn’t too far off. They’d come quite a distance in their flight from the monster. He shook his head.

“Let’s just give up and go home,” he said decisively, as though he’d never been surer of anything in his life. “We can snag a magestone someplace where there’s not a monster bent on murdering us. There was that fork in the road right after we came in, yeah? We still got other places to look.”

“Huh?” Deuce looked up at him. “How can you give up when the stone is right there? You all saw it. It was huge! We are 100 percent unexpelled

if we bring that magestone to the headmage. We have to go back and get it.”

“No, no, no.” Ace shook his head firmly, back and forth. “That’s an absolutely idiotic move, going back in there with that thing.”

“It’s not an idiotic move,” Deuce protested vehemently. “We’ve only got two hours until it’s tomorrow! We don’t have time to go look for another one!”

“Listen, you ...” Ace let out a long sigh. “You’re putting on a real show here, but can you actually take that monster out? Or is this like the chandelier, and you’re just gonna charge in there with absolutely no plan and drag the rest of us down with you? You’re a real pain in the butt, you know. If we’re talking death or just letting time run out, I’ll always pick time.”

“Chicken,” Deuce said, coldly.

“What.” Ace glared at him.

Deuce drew himself up and returned the glare, pulling his chin in. His voice was low and threatening as he started in on the other boy. “You swagger around like you’re the king of the hill, but you’re all talk, no action. If you weren’t willing to put your life on the line, you never shoulda come here in the first place. If you’re not willing to put your life on the line, then you shouldn’t promise that right from the start. Why don’t you just go back to your coop, you big chicken!”

“I-I don’t wanna be chased outta school either!” Grim cried, as if emboldened by Deuce’s spirit.

Ace winced ever so slightly and then smiled coldly, as if to say there was no way he was going to back down now. “Okay then. You two go on ahead with your sad little baby magic and fight the big bad monster. I’d like to see you try. Neither of you’s even half the mage I am.”

“Huhhhh?!” Deuce cried. “Oh, it’s on. Go ahead and say that again!”

“How dare you call my magic sad!” Grim snarled.

Yuya could only stand there, rooted to the spot, while they yelled and argued around him.

“It’s *your* fault.”

“To start with, *you* ...”

Angry roars filled the air, battering both Yuya’s nerves and his ears. He hung his head and saw that his clenched fists were trembling. His heart

was pounding as if it was going to pull itself apart, and he'd never been so out of breath in his life. He'd been hot before, and yet now he was so cold he could hardly stand it. The tension was a living creature, snaking around him and holding him fast.

He was not good with fighting. He hated it. He'd lived his whole life expressly avoiding a hint of anything that might have been a fight.

And yet from the moment he'd arrived in this place the day before, it had been a constant stream of battles. The more he tried to avoid them, the worse everything got. Challenges. Threats. Arguments. Violence. Bad things just kept happening.

Was it his fault for not being able to stop it? Would he be in a different position now if he'd been able to say something at some moment leading up to this one? Would he have been able to avoid this horrible quarreling?

The commotion was so loud that covering his ears would do nothing, and before he knew it, he was shrieking.

"Stop fighting!"

All shouting ceased immediately. His companions had apparently been stunned into silence by the fact that Yuya was even capable of raising his voice.

"Y-you scared me!" Grim was frozen in place, all the hair on his body standing on end.

Surprise also colored the faces of Ace and Deuce, but their expressions quickly grew surly again.

"Stop fighting? Woh-kay, buddy!" Ace snorted in laughter. "Ha! Now you're Mr. Goody Two-shoes? Listen up. You know who's gonna be in the most trouble if we don't get us a magestone? You, that's who! You got nowhere else to go, right? So how can you stand there and be all, 'Fighting's bad, let's all hold hands and be besties'? You gotta be kidding me." He jerked his chin up as if to express his disgust at the idea with his whole body.

Whatever Yuya said in response, Ace would no doubt sneer and laugh and make fun of him twice as badly. Normally he would have turned tail and run, but all the fighting had made him painfully aware that whatever he had been doing so far wasn't working, and the words came to him naturally. "That's not what I mean," he insisted.

“You can’t actually be saying we should give up?” Deuce scratched his head in annoyance. “Listen. To tell you the truth, I’m scared, too. But we have to have that magestone. And I’ll do whatever it takes to get it. I’ve got two arms—I can spare one of them.”

“And *I’m* saying, I don’t want anything to do with your desperate little mission,” Ace told him.

“If you hadn’t gotten in the way, I would’ve had that monster!” Deuce yelled.

“As if!” Ace rolled his eyes. “The only magic you’ve got any real control over is that stupid cauldron. And you weren’t even aiming right back there!”

“Well, how could I?” Deuce retorted. “Anyone’d need a minute or two in a situation like that!”

And they were off again. They snarled and snarked, and got absolutely nowhere.

As the two of them yelled about whose magic had held back whom and how, Yuya remembered what the headmage had said about magic not being a panacea. As an outsider, magic seemed like a dream to him, but it was a lot harder to control than he’d thought. It sounded like Deuce was saying that you needed to be able to concentrate to make the magic do what you wanted.

“I’m sure that I’ll be able to stay calm and cast the spell if we go back in there.” Deuce’s voice had an empty edge to it, and his face looked pained, as if he knew only too well that there was no way he’d be able to stay calm with an enormous, angry monster charging at him.

“Ace is right,” Yuya said, finally. “We’ll never dig out the magestone like this. I think we’ll only be beaten back if we try and go head-to-head with the monster.”

“What should we do then?” Grim asked.

“What?” Yuya paused to think. “We could work together?”

“Work together?” Ace made a gagging face. “No thanks. Next you’re gonna make us hold hands and sing a song or something.”

“I-I am not.”

“Then what?” Ace demanded. “You didn’t even do anything in there—you just ran away. So how exactly do you think you can ‘work together’ with me?”

He recalled what the ghosts had told him about the students at Night Raven College. People who prided themselves on their self-reliance, who excelled at magic. He was the most useless person there, the only one without any magical ability, and yet he was proposing that he could be of use to them. Now that he thought about it, why had Grim actually listened to him when they were facing off against the ghosts?

→ • → • → • → • → •

Kee. Keeee.

An odd sound, one that would never be found in nature, suddenly filled their ears. It was high pitched and sounded tragic, like someone weeping.

An eerie light floated in the tunnel, and the faceless bulk appeared in the darkness once more. The heavy pickax dragged behind it, digging into the earth. The hard metal cut away at the rock, producing the earsplitting sound.

“Mine. My stone ... Mine ...” the creature groaned.

Alone in front of the monster, Yuya braced himself. He took a deep breath and shouted at the top of his lungs, “The stone is mine!” And then he whirled around and ran, clutching his flashlight.

“Geeeet ouuuuut!”

The monster lumbered heavily after him, moving bizarrely and seemingly at random, throwing its limbs about as if to set them free of its body. It seemed utterly impossible that this could have been the movement of something rational.

Slipping through the large hands flailing around, Yuya ran with everything he had. He stumbled over a railroad tie that had long ago fulfilled its role of supporting the tracks and was now lying along the dark tunnel path. He fell.

“Eee!” he shrieked as something damp grabbed his ankle. His leg was yanked back roughly, firmly, and his white socks turned black. At first, he could see a clearly defined handprint, but then the outline bled and spread outward, like a spot of ink leaking inside a pencil case.

Yuya pressed his hands to the ground and tried to scrabble backward as the monster steadily closed the distance between them. The pickax was slowly lifted high into the air.

“Stone’s miiiiiiine!” the creature roared.

“I summon thee, cauldron!” rang Deuce’s voice.

A metallic clanging filled the tunnel.

Ever so tentatively, Yuya opened his eyes.

The monster had been crushed under the cauldron and was kicking and struggling against the ground.

“Yes! Got him!” Deuce cried from behind a rock a few steps away from Yuya. He thrust a clenched fist into the air. “The rest is up to you.”

At his signal, Ace and Grim leaped out from their separate hiding places. Yuya stepped back as Ace brandished his magical pen and Grim puffed out his stomach. Small sparks crackled in the air around them.

“You bet. I got this! One extra-large gust of wind comin’ up!” Ace shouted.

“With a side of Grim’s blazin’-hot fire! Myaaaah!” Grim called.

When Ace fired a sharp blast of wind, Grim set his flames riding on top of the powerful breeze. The air strengthened the pale flames, and the two combined, transforming into a massive, spinning vortex of flames that roared and swirled straight for the monster, swallowing its massive bulk.

“Graaaaaaar!” A scream echoed through the area. The heavy cauldron clattered and shook.

Beyond it, Yuya could hear Deuce shouting. “I got it! I got the magestone!” The hand he held up clutched a bright stone that dazzled the eye as it caught the light of the flames.

“Yaaaah! Let’s skedaddle then!” Ace shouted, and they all turned and raced toward the exit.

Yuya started laughing in relief until he heard a heavy *kawhud* behind them in the tunnel.

“Raar. Raaaaar. Raaaaaar!”

The ground beneath their feet and the tunnel around them juddered and jolted. The roaring turned their blood to ice, and they reflexively stopped moving.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Deuce murmured.

The monster howled, drowning out all other sounds, and the rocks around them bounced up into the air.

Zrrrush. Something stretched out toward them from the darkness—a hand dripping with black fluid. A hideously burned cap crumbled and fell to the ground.

“Stone.” A cracked head appeared before him, and Yuya gaped. “Stone ... Give baaaaaaack!”

“Watch out!”

Bwaan! Something wrapped around him, and he was shoved hard to one side. Yuya stumbled forward as there was a loud *crash*.

When he looked back, a lantern was lying in pieces on the ground where he’d been standing half a second earlier. If he hadn’t been knocked aside, the lantern would have smashed into him, and he wouldn’t have come out of that collision unscathed.

“Eyes on the prize, man.” Ace patted his shoulder. It was only then that Yuya finally realized Ace had saved him with his wind magic.

“This guy seriously can’t take a hint!” Grim cried, as he sent balls of fire shooting toward the monster alongside Ace’s bursts of wind.

Even enveloped in flames, their enemy continued to stagger forward, painfully persistent. Its sights were set squarely on Deuce and the magestone in his hands.

“Gotta stop it.” Deuce looked around, uncertain. “Rope? No, a cage?! But—!”

“Anything’s fine!” Yuya shouted.

“Anything.” Deuce glared at the monster as if shaking off his indecision. “I summon thee, cauldron!” The magical pen he held high in the air flashed sharply. “And cauldron! More cauldron! And now the finishing blow ... cauldrooon!”

“Unnnngaaaah!”

Yuya winced at the succession of earsplitting metallic crashes until he heard a snapping sound like breaking glass.

He stared at the pile of large cauldrons and watched as a black puddle leaked out slowly from beneath them.

When they headed out of the mine this time, nothing stopped them.

The moon offered a gentle welcome as they exited the tunnel. The pale light spilling between the leaves of the trees dazzled their eyes, and they grew weak with relief, letting their guard down at last and sinking to the ground on wobbly knees. The grassy earth was soft, and the air that entered their lungs no longer held the clammy chill of the mine, but was filled with the refreshing, verdant scent of the trees.

“Hey,” Ace said, lying on his back, chest heaving. “There’s this thing that’s been bothering me.”

“Yeah? What?” Deuce asked, too exhausted to even turn his head toward Ace.

“How come you can only make that cauldron, man? I mean, there’s gotta be other stuff you could summon, yeah?”

There was a brief silence, and when Deuce finally answered, there was a sulky edge to his voice.

“It’s the only thing that pops into my head when I’m all worked up in the moment. Like, you think sorcerer, you think cauldron, you know?”

“Okay, that is the most one track of all one-track minds,” Ace muttered, exasperated. And he let out a short, seemingly accidental bark of a laugh. “Ha!” This was followed by another and another, until he was howling with laughter.

Perhaps out of their own giddy relief, Grim and Deuce joined in, and eventually Yuya too was rolling around giggling.

“We really went and snatched that magestone right out from under that weirdo monster!” Ace said, between bouts of laughter. “I can’t even believe it!”

“Yeah!” Deuce agreed. “And it’s all thanks to Yu for getting us on track.”

“Ah, I mean, all I did was run away.” Yuya blushed. “You guys did all the work.”

The plan Yuya had proposed was that they use him as bait. He had thought harder about the time he and Grim had beaten back the ghosts and how they’d run around Ramshackle Dorm together. He remembered the satisfied smile on Grim’s face as Yuya held him. If he’d remained standing on the sidelines, merely watching, he was sure Grim never would have agreed to work with him. It was only after Yuya threw himself into the fight that Grim had gotten on board with him.

This time, he had decided he would draw the monster's attention while the others got into place and prepared. That way, Deuce could focus and make sure his magic hit its target, and he figured Ace and Grim could be pretty strong if they combined their powers. When he outlined his ideas, the other three had been speechless, so he'd felt a little twinge of satisfaction.

Yuya was a mere human being; he had no special powers. Grim, Ace, and Deuce were grand wizards in comparison, which was why he'd been able to trust them to handle the monster. He'd been terrified to stand in that tunnel alone, but he'd pushed forward with his belief that the others would come through for him somehow.

"So you see, it's all thanks to you guys," he said, and Deuce shook his head.

"You're the one who came up with the plan," Deuce said. "And I mean, that was a seriously wild idea, using yourself as bait. But you totally pulled it off, dude! You've got serious guts!"

Yuya found it odd how Deuce's speech would get a little brash every so often, but he grinned at the enthusiasm behind the words.

"Deuce's maybe totally right there," Ace readily agreed. "That was a pretty good plan. Even the furball's sad little magic's not so sad with my help. *That's* how you do it!"

Yuya expected complaints like "It's not sad" or "I'm not a furball," but Grim didn't so much as make a peep.

Huh? He sat up. "Grim? What are you doing?"

He was digging through the grass near the entrance to the tunnel. "Something smells amazing!" He sniffed around, nose wriggling, and his claws came up against something. "Found it! This is it!"



He held up a black object about as large as a gumball. It rolled around his palm and looked to be as hard as a rock. They all peered at it.

“Hey, wait.” Deuce frowned. “Is that a magestone, too?”

“Nah.” Ace shook his head. “I mean, I’ve never heard of a magestone black as coal.”

Yuya looked over at the large shining magestone in Deuce’s hand. This new stone was dull in comparison; rather than reflecting the light of the moon, it seemed to suck in every last drop of it.

“That monster was black, too,” Ace noted. “Maybe it’s part of the wreckage? It’s obviously not the same as the other stones here.”

“Now that you mention it,” Yuya said, “I might have kicked something while we were running away.”

Grim’s tail swished from side to side. “Haaah.” He stared enraptured at the black stone and began to tremble uncontrollably.

“I can’t!” he cried at last. “I gotta go for it! Time to chow down!”

“Huh?!”

The three boys gaped as the black stone disappeared into his open mouth.

Grim crunched away on this lump of unknown origin, found by the side of the road, and then suddenly pressed his hands to his mouth as his eyes grew wide. “Myaaaah!”

“Are you okay?!” Yuya cried, worriedly.

“Mm. Yummmmmmyyyyyy!” Grim sprang up into the air. “Rich in flavor and full bodied. Like sweet fragrant flowers burstin’ into bloom on my tongue. A whole field of them right in my mouuuth!” He licked his chops deliciously and did a little skipping dance. He seemed to truly relish the black stone.

“You picked that up off the ground and *ate* it.” Yuya was exasperated.

“Gross!” Ace made a face beside him. “Monsters must have real weird tastes.”

“Don’t you dare eat this by accident.” Deuce tightened his grip on the precious magestone, which he needed two hands to hold.

Yuya looked at the stone and nodded. “Okay. Let’s go. We gotta give that thing to the headmage.”



“PARDON?! You’re telling me you actually went to the Enchanted Mine in search of a magestone?” Crowley’s stunned cry greeted them when they barged into the headmage’s office. “I assumed you’d soon give up and return.”

Deuce rolled his eyes at this unexpected reaction. “It wasn’t like that was an option! I said I’d do anything.”

“Indeed, you did, but...” Crowley shrugged. “Never in my wildest imaginings did I think you would actually return with a magestone! I’d heard that the mine was picked clean long ago, so I went ahead with preparing your expulsion documents.”

“A-a-a-are you serious?!” Grim shook with anger. “While we were fighting that huge monster, you were expelling us?!”

“Monster?” Crowley blinked at him.

“Yeah!” Ace leaned forward toward Crowley. “We got into a real tangle with this superstrong, totally nasty monster.”

They told the headmage about what they had encountered in the tunnel. The shape of it, the voice, the horror. When they were done explaining how they had finally overcome it, Crowley covered his face with his hands.

“Unh,” he moaned. “Unnnnh.”

“What’s the matter?” Yuya asked, timidly.

“Aaaaaaawn.” Crowley’s cry grew louder and morphed into a howl.

“What is this guy’s deal?” Grim arched an eyebrow at the headmage. “Burstin’ into tears in public?”

“It can’t be.” Crowley sniffled and pressed his hands to his mask. “To think that the victorious day would come when the students of Night Raven College joined hands to defeat a common foe!”

“I did *not* hold that guy’s hand,” Deuce exclaimed.

“Oh, and like I would hold *yours*? Okay, I’m out. That’s too creepy!” Ace shot back.

Deuce and Ace pointed at each other and scowled, lines cutting deep into their faces. But perhaps seeing that even in this, they were in sync, Crowley nodded happily and said, “Yu. I am extremely grateful in this moment.”

“Uh?” Yuya craned his head to one side, and Crowley clasped his shoulders.

“Yu, my doubts are allayed,” he said. “You have a gift.”

“A gift?” Yuya’s eyes grew wide. “Me? What?”

“You possess the talents of a beast tamer,” the headmage declared.

“A beast tamer?!” Yuya was baffled. “What even is that?”

Crowley grinned at him brightly. “Ever since you regaled me with the tale of how you vanquished the ghosts with Grim, I have wondered if that might not be the case.”

Ace and Deuce ignored the big reveal and continued to quarrel. Crowley watched this out of the corner of his eye as he leaned forward and began to speak. “The truth is, my students have all been selected by the Dark Mirror for their exceptional talent and potential as future mages.”

“Yes.” Yuya nodded. “You told me that before.”

“But at the same time, great talent begets great egos,” Crowley said. “Most of our students are quite proud and headstrong. They’re so self-reliant and self-centered that they never even consider cooperating with others.”

“I’d heard that, too,” he responded after a moment. This was the point the ghosts had pressed upon him, but given that the person in charge of the institution was saying the same thing, he realized the issue must be more serious than he’d imagined.

Sniffing, Crowley tentatively patted Yuya’s shoulder. “You possess no magic. Yet despite that—or perhaps because of it—you were able to

convince those who *can* use magic to work together for a common goal. Yu, I'm certain that you are a vital resource for this school. My educator's intuition tells me so." He fell silent then, the eyes that peeked out from behind his mask firmly focused on Yuya.

"Umm. Headmage?" He had no idea what Crowley was thinking.

"I've made my decision," the headmage said finally, in a quiet voice. "Trappola, Spade. You have found a magnificent magestone that is perfect for the chandelier. As promised, I hereby revoke your pending expulsions."

"Yessss!" Deuce pumped a fist in the air. "I get to stay at the school!"

"Natch. I knew it'd all work out." Ace put his hands on his hips and shook his head in exasperated satisfaction. Happiness crept onto his face as it slackened into a smile.

Crowley turned toward Yuya. "Furthermore, Yu."

"Yes, sir." He stood a little taller.

"I am granting you the qualifications necessary to attend school at Night Raven College."

"What? As an actual student?!" He had to have misheard that, but Crowley's smile remained firm. "A student? Really? You mean, I don't have to be a janitor anymore?"

"Yes. Did I not just tell you that you are exactly what we need at this academy? Thus, we must offer you an appropriate welcome. It *is* extraordinarily kind of me, of course!" he concluded enthusiastically.

Yuya looked toward Grim. The small monster was standing alone, off to the side. His drooping ears shadowed his face, hiding his expression from Yuya, but his rounded back seemed wretched somehow.

Yuya was about to call out to him when Crowley's gold fingernail snapped out at his nose. "Halt this instant. There is, however, one condition for your admission."

"A condition?" Yuya's heart sank.

"Not to keep harping on the fact, but your inability to use magic is, for a mage, unacceptable. You would not be able to adequately pursue the school's curriculum, not to mention perform the basic tasks of daily life," he sniffed. "To that end. Grim."

"Hwuh?" Grim lifted his face, and Crowley met his eyes.

“You and Yu will be permitted to enter Night Raven College as one joint student,” the headmage told him.

“One joint student?” Yuya’s heart leaped back up. “You mean ...”

“I-I can attend this school, too?” Grim asked, stunned.

“Basically, yeah?” Ace said.

“Probably?” Deuce agreed.

Grim’s face lit up as he raced over to Yuya. He climbed up to Yuya’s shoulders and used them as a podium to lock eyes with Crowley. “I can be a student at Night Raven College?!”

“Yes.”

“Really?!”

“Really.”

“Really really?!”

“You *are* persistent, hm! If you must have proof, here.” Crowley waved his staff, and small particles of light rained down on Grim. Glittering, they came together in soft threads and gently stroked the white fur of his neck. The light concentrated around his torso, bounced back, and disappeared. “There. In place of a magical pen. I suspect your paws cannot handle the implement.”

“Ah, sweet! A magestone, just for me?!”

Once the particles of light cleared away, a pale purple stone hung from a ribbon around Grim’s neck. The color was different, but it was the same size as the stones in Ace’s and Deuce’s magical pens. A badge of studenthood at Night Raven College.

“All right! I look awesome! Yu!” Grim danced about in delight. “Check it out! My very own magestone.”

“That’s great, Grim.” Yuya pulled the monster down from his shoulders.

He’d spent a mere two days with Grim, and he couldn’t say that the monster had been anything close to friendly or cooperative. He’d attacked Yuya the second they met and was selfish and quick to pick a fight. Even two days were enough for Yuya to see that Grim was the type of troublemaker that he normally tried to stay away from.

At the same time, he was painfully aware of how badly Grim wanted to be a sorcerer. There was nothing Yuya was devoted to in the same way, and perhaps that was why just seeing Grim rejoicing made his own heart sing.

“Congratulations,” he said, and really meant it.

Grim grinned with all his teeth. Smiles appeared on Ace's and Deuce's faces as well.

"Pretty great, huh, Yu?" Deuce said, happily. "And you too, Grim."

Perhaps not hearing him, or perhaps simply ignoring him, Grim kept humming to himself, lost in ecstatic daydreams. "I am *amazing*. The best of the best. Cream of the crop. I'll be a great mage in no time flat!"

"Hey," Ace whispered in Yuya's ear.

"Is he ... okay?" Deuce asked.

"Probably?" Yuya replied, but Deuce looked dubious. Yuya knew how he felt.

"Stay strong." Ace slapped his back. "The two of you are one person now. You gotta keep a tight rein on that Grim, y'know?"

Two as one. They were in this together. If Grim stirred up trouble again, they might face expulsion.

"Oh, rest assured on that point! I have thought that through. Here, Yu. For you." The headmage held out a small camera. "This is a ghost camera. It's an old magical artifact, able to capture parts of the subject's soul. I would like you to photograph Grim and the other students with this camera, make a record of your campus life, and report back to me." The headmage glanced at Grim. He was dancing around, waving his fists, tail swishing back and forth. "It's all fine and good to be in high spirits, but I'd ask that you please report to me immediately when his high spirits reach new heights and lead to mischief."

"I understand." Yuya nodded firmly.

"Now then!" Crowley cleared his throat. "The hour has grown late, so further details shall have to wait till the morrow. You are all dismissed. Return to your dorms."

"Good night, sir!"

The students thanked Crowley and left the headmage's office.

Ace let out a big yawn. "The headmage was right. I'm seriously wiped. C'mon, Deuce. Let's head back to the dorm."

"Yeah, I'm exhausted," Deuce agreed. "I'm going straight to bed."

"Um!" Yuya called out as they started to walk away. "Thanks for everything today!"

Ace and Deuce looked back at the same time and grinned.

"We're classmates starting tomorrow." Deuce waved. "See you then!"

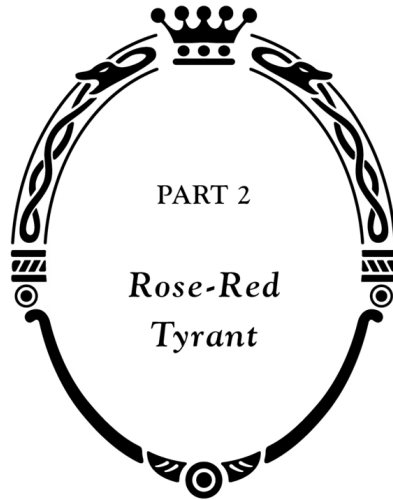
“You’ve got this, Yu.”

That was perhaps the first time Ace had called him by name. Yuya stared absently as they headed off, and Grim jabbed him in the shin.

“Hey, Yu. Time for us to book it, too. Back to Ramshackle Dorm.”

Apparently, the name “Ramshackle Dorm” had stuck, but Grim didn’t seem particularly bothered by it anymore. Bursting with happiness, he yanked Yuya’s hand.

“We’ve gotta hurry up and go to bed. I mean, we’re not janitors no more. Tomorrow, we’ll finally ... Finally!” He jumped up and down, and the magestone around his neck glittered. “We’re finally starting a new dazzling life as students at Night Raven College!”



PART 2

Rose-Red
Tyrant



THE MORNING CLASSROOM was bustling—yet another similarity Yuya had found between his world and this world. Yuya and Grim sat to one side of the large classroom as their fellow students whispered among themselves.

“Hey! Check it out,” said one student.

“Isn’t that the guy from orientation? And the monster that tried to burn everything down. I thought they tossed him out?” said another.

“You didn’t hear? So, like, after school yesterday, in the cafeteria ...”

“Myah ha ha! They can’t take their eyes offa me!” Grim laughed. “Tough being a star, huh?”

Yuya was hanging his head, feeling extremely awkward, when he heard a familiar voice. “Think again, man.”

“Huh?” Yuya jerked his faced up and saw the heart and spade suits looking back at him.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t Ace and Deuce.” Grim looked at the boys in the seats ahead of them dubiously. “How come you guys’re here?”

“Could ask you the same thing,” Ace said. “Does this mean you’re in our class?”

“So then ...” Yuya frowned.

“Me and Ace are in class A. Guess we’re all in this together, huh?” Deuce patted Yuya’s shoulder. “You’ll be fine. You’re just nervous about your first day, right? Yesterday was basically nothing but introductions and

explanations. I'm sure you won't have any trouble, even though you're starting a day late."

"Deuce." Ace glared at him. "How about you quit with the good-little-boy act, as if you're the class leader or something? I mean, you're actually an idiot."

"Who are you calling an idiot?!" Deuce snarled.

"Yu, pal, you come to me if you need anything. Don't ask this knucklehead, or you'll end up to your neck in trouble. I can't handle another mine monster."

"Oh. Okay." Yuya felt even more awkward and nervous with Ace talking and Deuce smiling at him. He was grateful to them. After all, they'd saved his life, and he was only here at Night Raven College as a student thanks to their help. If he'd gone after the magestone by himself, he'd be lying in a ditch somewhere right about now.

"He doesn't need *you*. So long as he's got me, everything'll be peachy perfect," Grim informed them in a huff.

"Big talk for a weasel," Ace retorted.

Yuya really had no idea how he was supposed to have a casual conversation with these people. He hadn't joined in the morning small talk among his classmates in his original world, either. Offering up a noncommittal reply to a question was one thing, but the lighthearted back-and-forth he heard around him was much too difficult to participate in. He'd spent his whole life avoiding anything to do with anyone. And when it came to Ace, he was honestly still a little scared of him. If Yuya answered him sincerely, Ace might laugh and tell Yuya not to take him so seriously, as he had when they'd first met.

After agonizing over it for a second, Yuya bowed his head. "Thanks." His smile might have been a little awkward, but it was the best he could do. "It's great to be in the same class."

Ace opened his mouth like he had something else to say, but the clatter of the classroom door opening made him turn around and face forward.

"Morning, little puppies." A man came to stand in front of the podium, the hard soles of his shoes clacking against the floor. His coat was spectacular, voluminous, and eye catching, with alternating black-and-white panels. Shiny red gloves covered his hands, and his hair was pulled

back, half-white, half-black. His shoes were perfectly polished, right down to the tips, with not a stain on them.

The man waved his teacher's pointer, and the class fell silent. He spotted Yuya and Grim near the back of the classroom and nodded. "I see some new faces here."

The other students whirled their heads around to look for themselves.

"No doubt some of you have already noticed," the man said, "but we have a—no, two new puppies joining the pack. Now, newcomers. Be polite and say hello to the class."

Grim leaped on top of his desk. "My name is Grim. I'm gonna be a super genius sorcerer!"

"Yuya Kuroki—oh! I mean Yu. It's nice to meet you," Yuya stammered.

"Yu. Grim. My name is Divus Crewel. I am your homeroom teacher. You may call me Professor Crewel."

This flashy guy is a teacher? Unable to tell whether this imposing introduction was a joke or not, Yuya nodded his head regardless.

Crewel looked out over the class and smiled, his lips thin. "Listen. Beat this into those little heads of yours. They may not be your run-of-the-mill puppies, but the headmage has personally welcomed them into our ranks. They are students equal to every other one of you here. You will refrain from any tiresome quarreling. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" the students replied energetically.

"Good boys." In contrast to the words he spoke, the look on Crewel's face did not soften. The sharp eyeliner around his eyes highlighted the narrowing of his gaze as he further scrutinized the students. He likely understood only too well from previous experience that boys of this age were not about to heed a single word from any adult.

The eyes around Yuya were powerfully curious and inquisitive, focusing on him in the same way a pack of dogs with nothing to do might look at a mouse released into their midst. He felt not just ordinary, but as though he were surrounded by creatures of an entirely different species. The gazes that bore through him seemed to very eloquently inform him of exactly what his classmates thought of him—*You're not one of us*.

"I'm beat." Yuya stretched out in his chair. Morning classes were over, and it was finally time for lunch.

Yuya and Grim followed the river of students streaming toward the cafeteria and copied what everyone else did to get some lunch. He didn't love that the cafeteria ghosts pointed and yelled "The chandelier!" at them, but he had no complaints about the tasty food. He brought a bite of shepherd's pie to his mouth, and the fragrance of grilled potato and the umami of meat spread out across his tongue.

The cafeteria at Night Raven College had a basic menu that was free for all students and charged for any changes or additions to the main dishes. There were several options for the basic daily special, and given that Yuya had limited financial aid from the headmage, this was a real blessing.

"Hey, Yu," Grim asked from where he sat next to him. "You gonna eat that or what?"

Yuya's fork had become impossibly heavy. The rest of the students gathered in the large dining hall were sneaking glances at him and whispering to each other. He didn't have to strain his ears to know what they were saying.

Potionology that morning had been a disaster. He hadn't understood 90 percent of the words coming out of Crewel's mouth. The textbook's table of contents listed plants, fungi, and medicinal herbs, and he felt like the curriculum was similar to that of a science subject he'd previously taken like biology. Most of the names were totally unfamiliar to him, however, and while he had been able to read the words on the page, he had no idea what they meant. The class was also quite advanced. After a cursory reading, he kept encountering one impossible thing after another, things he knew did not exist in his own world—"a plant that shrieks when pulled out by the root," "a transparent mushroom that only grows in places with high magic concentrations." He had been too busy being surprised to do any true learning.

The other students didn't know what to do with the baffled and bewildered Yuya. All of them looked at him with fascination, but whenever he turned his head their way, they averted their eyes like bugs scattering. They seemed to be handling him delicately, which made it hard for him to ask them for help.

Grim should've been his only remaining shred of hope—a guide to this world—but he knew about as much as Yuya, or maybe even less. They were doomed.

“If you’re not gonna eat it, I’ll be happy to take it off your hands.” Grim reached for Yuya’s plate.

“I’m going to eat it.” Yuya yanked his plate back just as someone approached the other side of the table and stopped in front of him.

It was Deuce with a tray in his hands. “I’m sitting,” he announced.

“Oh!” Yuya nodded. “Sure, go ahead.”

Deuce sat down in the chair opposite him and picked up his fork. “Phew! This place is packed. I was worried I wouldn’t be able to find a seat.”

Yuya looked to his left and his right. Empty chairs on both sides. Students filled the cafeteria, and yet the area around Yuya and Grim was pointedly deserted. It was almost funny how desperately everyone was avoiding them.

“So, like, it doesn’t bother you?” Yuya asked timidly. Rather than the murmurs subsiding with Deuce’s arrival at their table, they only grew louder, with the majority of spectators now wondering who Deuce was.

“Doesn’t what bother me?” Deuce looked up at him curiously, his cheeks stuffed with food.

“What? I mean ...” Yuya looked around the hall pointedly.

Deuce followed Yuya’s gaze, apparently only just now noticing the commotion. He finally nodded. “Oh, those guys? Now that you mention it, they do keep looking over here, huh? Nah, I don’t really care.”

He was fairly relaxed, almost an entirely different person from the boy panicking over his magic before, and he barely registered the goings-on around them. This was no doubt the real Deuce. It wasn’t so much maturity as it was an unusual amount of nerve. Yuya’s concern that Deuce might be bothered by any of this appeared to be entirely unwarranted.

“You really take all this stuff in stride, huh?” Yuya said. “I’m impressed.”

“You think? I’m just regular, though,” Deuce said nonchalantly as he cut a large chunk of the pie on his plate and brought it to his mouth. He chewed with his mouth open, devouring the pie with obvious gusto, as if competing with Grim.

It would be so much easier if Yuya could be like that, too. Life would be so much more manageable if he could simply not care what other people thought, the way Deuce did. He took a sip of water to wash down the pie.

Just thinking about the afternoon classes that lay ahead, he was so jealous of Deuce's and Grim's boldness that he could hardly stand it.

"I am completely exhausted." Yuya collapsed onto the bed at Ramshackle Dorm after he had mustered up the last of his strength to take a shower. He had reached his limit. "I don't want to do anything else today."

The afternoon's Flight class had been for practicing flying on a broom, which the magicless Yuya could not participate in. He could've sat out on the sidelines and watched everyone else, but the teacher, Vargas, had told him he would have to make up for his lack of magic with muscles, and forced him to do sit-ups for the entire period.

Vargas was a very muscular man and looked very much the part of gym teacher. His tightly coiffed hair and goatee were very dashing.

"Check out these pecs!" He struck a pose to show off his chest, and his red track jacket threatened to split from his flexed muscles. "Folks are obsessed with me. Because, as you can see, I am *jacked*. Build up those muscles, kid. They'll get rid of everything that ails you!"

He told Yuya he would come up with a special training regime just for him before the next Flight class. Yuya was grateful for his consideration, but he'd been so out of breath he hadn't been able to respond. It wasn't just his brain that was overwhelmed anymore—his body was also weak with exhaustion.

"I ain't movin' from this spot," Grim groaned.

Yuya had only watched the class, but the whole flying thing had looked pretty hard, too. Grim had bounced up and fallen from his broom more than once, and now he was stretched out in the bed, just as wiped out as Yuya was.

While they were at school, the ghosts had put together a bed for them. The mattress was new, and the scent of laundry detergent wafted from the white sheets. It was big enough for him and Grim, with room to spare. He couldn't have asked for a better present to celebrate their admission to the school.

"First period tomorrow's History of Magic," Yuya said.

"Haah," Grim sighed. "I want a class where I can show off my amazing magic."

“I don’t care what the class is so long as it’s easy. But history ...” He could easily picture how difficult the class was going to be for him, considering he had come from an entirely different world. No doubt he’d be just as exhausted again tomorrow night.

Was he going to have to live like this forever from this point on? Feeling like he had nowhere to go, no purpose, no home to return to, and just aimlessly wandering through life? The more he thought about it, the gloomier he became.

“Let’s just go to sleep. G’night, Grim.”



Yuya fell so quickly into a deep, deep slumber that he never knew if Grim said anything in response.



CARDS: Hurry up and paint those roses red! Slather them quickly, as aforesaid!

ACE OF CLUBS: Hurry, hurry! There are still roses left to paint!
They're painting...roses?

ALICE: Why are you painting these white roses red?

CARDS: Huh?

TWO OF CLUBS: Why, you ask? It's quite simple. We planted the wrong color, you see.

ACE OF CLUBS: The Queen likes her roses red. If they're white, we'll lose our heads!

ALICE: Goodness!

THREE OF CLUBS: And so, we're painting the roses red.

The world changed abruptly.

Bang, bang. Bang, bang.

The noise echoed through the room. At first, Yuya wondered if the ghosts were up to something, but then he heard “Open up!” in a voice that was too high to be theirs. Someone was knocking on the dorm’s front door.

He opened his eyes a crack and saw through the curtainless window that it was pitch black outside. Still night. He moved his sluggish mouth with difficulty. “Someone’s here?”

“Myaah? Who? Middle of the night ... Go away,” Grim grumbled as he yanked the blankets over his head. “Ignore ’em. Not here.”

Yuya followed suit and closed his eyes again. Unfortunately, not only did the knocking not stop, but it also grew more insistent, more frequent. He and Grim poked at each other and squabbled about who would go check it out, until they were both more or less awake. In the end, they decided they would both go answer the door.

“Quit it! Geez!” Grim hollered. “Who’s there? You got any idea what time it is?!”

The banging only stopped when they turned on the light in the entryway.

“Who is it?” Yuya asked. “Headmage?”

“It’s me, Ace,” said a voice through the door.

“Huh? Ace?” He and Grim exchanged a look at the unexpected visitor. “What’s up? It’s late.”

Yuya opened the door. It really was Ace, and he looked extremely unhappy. While Yuya and Grim were in their pajamas, he was still in his school uniform. But Yuya’s eyes were drawn to one thing in particular—the large, very obvious black-and-red collar around Ace’s neck.

“B-bwah!” Grim cried out when he noticed it. The collar was the same as the one Riddle had shackled Grim with at the orientation.

They stared, stunned.

“I am *never* going back to Heartslybyul Dorm!” Ace shouted, trembling with rage. “I’m joining your dorm. For good.”



In the days after orientation, new students could be seen wandering around the sprawling campus grounds, hopelessly lost. At Night Raven College, ghosts holding up wayfinding signs were as much a sign of fall as the changing leaves on the trees. The layout of the school was confusing, to say the least.

After spending some time as a lost lamb himself, Ace had finally stepped into the kitchenette at Heartslabyul, and the tension slid out of his shoulders. In the supposedly short trip from his room, he'd taken a wrong turn three times. Outside on campus was one thing. He was good at dealing with things on the fly, and he'd always had a pretty good memory. He already had the entire map of the large campus neatly tucked away in his head.

And yet his own dorm had him at wit's end, with so many unnecessarily complicated twists and turns. Doors too tiny for anyone to actually use, windows that opened into walls, and an overall design sensibility that could best be described as dizzying. Getting lost was almost an inevitability.

"Aaah, I'm starving," he said to himself. "I need food."

Unfortunately, the fruit basket on the table was empty. He should have seen that coming since it was already late. But he couldn't give up his quest, so he began to rummage through the cupboards.

He hadn't been able to focus during lunch and then again at dinner, so he'd barely tasted his food. With the entire student body keeping Yuya and Grim at arm's length, Ace had spent time deliberating whether he should say hi or if it was better to ignore them; but then Deuce had plonked himself down at their table and other people had started talking to Ace, and before he knew it, dinnertime was over.

Ace was, if nothing else, a growing boy, and the food he'd absently gulped down had been digested hours ago, so now his empty stomach ached. He opened the fridge, and something delicious caught his eye. A large tart. Three of them, in fact, taking up a significant amount of shelf space.

"Whoa, score! Tarts! Those look amazing!" He took one out of the fridge and gently lifted the glass lid. Since each of the three tarts were in their own pans, and there was no sign of a box like the ones bakeries provided for cake, he had to assume they were homemade. But they did not look homemade at all—the tightly packed berries were glazed with nappage that

made them sparkle like gemstones. Irresistibly drawn to the tart, he brought it closer to his nose, and the sweet, buttery scent practically short-circuited his brain.

“There’s plenty to go around and all. No one’d notice if I snagged one teensy little slice, right?” He hesitated a moment before extracting a slice of the beautiful, round tart—but desserts exist to be eaten, and this was the dorm fridge, so the tarts had to have been put in there for the dorm residents. He looked around and grinned. Even if that weren’t the case, he would just apologize when his crime came to light.

Lifting the slice up to his mouth, he took a huge bite. Instantly, the fragrant dough, the lightness of the cream, and the sour-sweet taste of the fruit filled his mouth. The slice was bigger than his hand, but he still polished it off in three bites flat.

“So good!” he declared. “I’m in pastry paradise right now.”

“Of course they’re good,” came a voice in reply. “Trey made them. His tarts are always exceptional.”

“So they *are* homemade! I can’t even believe how good this—” Ace froze. Ever so timidly, he looked over his shoulder to see hair redder than the strawberries he’d just eaten. “H-Housewarden?!”

Riddle was standing imposingly in the doorway, his arms crossed and slate gray eyes burning with anger. Ace shuddered in fear.

“The Queen of Hearts’ Rule 89 is quite clear. ‘Never eat a tart without the queen’s express permission.’”

“Oh! Uh, this is—” Ace stammered. “Uh. Not that.”

“I will not hear excuses!” Riddle cried. “How dare you touch what is mine? The theft of tarts is a serious crime!”

“This was *yours*?!” Ace panicked, and Riddle waved his magical pen.

“*Off with Your Head!*”

—•••—•••—•••—

“And ... here I am.” Ace finished his explanation from his seat on the lounge sofa, and Yuya and Grim exchanged looks, at a loss for words. Ace grew even sulkier. “What? What’s that look for? Think about it, man. You

don't think it's over the top for my magic to get sealed away for eating *one* slice of tart?! For a mage, that's like having your arms and legs bound and shackled! C'mon, you *know* this is messed up."

"I mean, you're both kinda terrible?" Grim noted.

"There were three whole tarts. Three!" Ace protested. "It's not like he could eat 'em all himself."

"I'd go ballistic if you snuck even a single bite off me," Grim sniffed. "No matter where you ran, I'd hunt you down and make you pay."

"Well, maybe *you* would." Ace turned to the silent Yuya. "What about you?"

"Me?" Yuya was suddenly flustered.

"Rack that brain of yours, man," Ace told him. "Remember all that stuff Riddle said to you at the orientation? You think he's a tyrant, yeah?"

Yuya felt like picking a side would only lead to conflict, so he avoided the question entirely. "I don't know," he said finally.

"For real?" Ace's shoulders slumped in disappointment. "So no one's got my back here?"

"Why were you so hungry anyway?" Yuya asked. "Did you miss supper or something?"

"I had supper. It just wasn't enough!" Ace said, angrily.

It seemed like there were no extenuating circumstances to consider. "B-but, like, maybe Riddle would forgive you if you apologized?" Yuya wondered.

Ace looked up at him. "You think?"

"Mm-hmm." Yuya nodded. "If you really mean it, absolutely." He thought back to the glimpse he'd gotten of Riddle at the orientation: anger that made Yuya's hair stand on end, a beet red face like bubbling magma, and a stubborn and strong-willed tone. It would no doubt take some work to get him to let this go, but that didn't mean it was impossible.

Ace gave up. "Fine. I'll apologize to him tomorrow."

"Great." Yuya smiled.

"So anyway, let me crash here tonight," Ace continued.

"Huh?" Grim said. "Why should we? No way!"

"Geez, dude." Ace rolled his eyes. "You gotta let me stay. The guys have been all 'wah, the chandelier,' and 'blah blah as a Heartsblabul student.' I

can't go crawling back now after running out like that." He leaned forward abruptly and clapped his hands together. "Pleeeeeease!"

He raised his eyebrows up high on his head, making his eyes rounder, like a pleading puppy dog's. He clearly knew how to work the cute angle. He was cunning and pushy, but in a way that made him sympathetic and likable. He cocked his head to one side.

"Come on, there's no one here but you guys anyway, right? This place is so big, and it's just for one night. I promise I'll pay you back later."

"Fine," Grim agreed with a scowl. "You can crash, but it'll cost ya ten cans of tuna!"

"You've got a deal." Ace grinned.

The ghosts slipped through the wall and flew around in delight.

"Ooh, a frieeeeeend!" one chirped.

"Never thought we'd see folks living it up at Ramshackle Dorm again!" said another.

"Shaddap! And quit jumpin' outta the walls!" Grim waved his paws around in the air as if he were swatting at flies. Yuya watched as the usual game of tag with the ghosts began.

"Hey," Ace said abruptly, a complicated look on his face.

"Hm?" Yuya took his eyes off the chase. "Sorry. What is it, Ace?"

"Are you still mad?" he mumbled.

Yuya blinked in confusion. "About what?"

"You know, getting off on the wrong foot," he said. "When we first met in front of the statues of the Great Seven?"

Yuya's heart leaped in his chest. He'd wanted to forget about the whole thing. Ace had seemed so nice when he first started talking to them, and Yuya had been totally taken in by him until Ace had done a total one-eighty and started making fun of him. He'd laughed maliciously and called him "a total bore."

He wasn't sure what he should say. He wasn't angry; he was scared and didn't know how to interact with someone who was so straightforward. What was Ace trying to accomplish by bringing that up now?

Yuya snuck a glance at him, but Ace was hanging his head, so he couldn't see his expression. He tried to puzzle out an answer, but he couldn't glean any clues. If he didn't hurry up and say something, Ace would probably get annoyed and wonder how long Yuya was going to hold a grudge.

Perhaps sensing Yuya's panic, Ace muttered, "Sorry," still looking down. "Huh?" Yuya said, doubting what he'd heard.

"Oh, come *on*!" Ace yanked his head back up. "I said I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know your whole deal, and I said some stuff that was maybe kind of mean. It's just, I heard there was this guy with no magic at the school, and I figured you had bullied your way in here or something. Like, the rest of us had to work our butts off to get in, and you just sorta waltzed right in. It bugged me, all right? Like, hey, no fair!" This was delivered quickly, almost in a single breath, as he fidgeted awkwardly. "My bad." He glanced at Yuya. "And since I apologized, you'll forgive me, yeah? Call it even?"

Yuya couldn't help but laugh. It was so like Ace. "Yeah," he nodded. "And I wasn't mad. Not at all."

Ace had been mean and unfair but also entirely correct. That was why Yuya had been so scared. At last, he realized that the whole incident had been nothing more than the posturing of a boy the same age as him. Thinking back, he recognized that Ace had also been pretty nice to him, like when he'd said hello to him that very morning. And yet Yuya had been on edge, wondering if there was some kind of ulterior motive behind the simple greeting, which wasn't fair to Ace. What else would Ace think was the reason behind Yuya's fear of him?

He also remembered that he'd missed his chance to say something important. "I really appreciated your help yesterday." Now it was his turn to bow his head. He hadn't been able to thank Ace properly for rescuing him from the monster in the nick of time. "If you hadn't been there, Ace, I don't think I'd be here right now."

"'Appreciated'?" Ace snorted a laugh. "This isn't some highfalutin rich-kid school. You don't need to be so polite."

Yuya smiled. "Okay. Thanks."

It seemed to Yuya that Ace's cheeks were colored with the slightest hint of red, making him actually look his age for once.

"Wohkay!" Ace clapped his hands. "So we're all clear—no hard feelings. Now I can crash here with a clean conscience."

"Hey!" Grim closed in on Ace with a pillow from one of the ghosts. "I'll tell you right now, outside of the bedroom me and Yu use, this entire dump is buried under a foot of dust—so if you wanna crash, you better start cleanin'!"

“Is that any way to treat a guest?” Ace snapped back. “Just lemme have this room. Yu’s one thing, but *you* can basically sleep anywhere.”

“I’m very sensitive,” Grim sniffed, huffily. “The only place I can sleep’s a bed.”

“Liar! You were sawing some serious logs today in Potionology!”

“On your very first day?!” the ghosts yelled at Grim.

The lounge of Ramshackle Dorm was full of life, and Ace’s cheerful attitude was like a sun in the room. When he laughed, Yuya felt his own heart lifting, as if his sadness from a moment before had never been.

He still didn’t understand anything about the world around him, but at least he was moving forward now. In which case, he might just be able to try a little harder tomorrow. With this warm thought, Yuya fell back asleep.

A hoarse, electronic buzz scratched at his consciousness. It was the faintest of sounds, too quiet to be an alarm clock or a phone alarm. Yuya ignored it and rolled over.

The *zzt zzt* of a broken bell turned into the *bang bang* of a knock—the same sound he’d heard last night. Someone was banging on the front door of Ramshackle Dorm. Grim had shoved his head under his pillow, but he leaped up at last. He had reached his limit. “Aah! Man! First thing in the morning?! Who is it this time?!” he growled.

Yuya changed into his uniform and stepped into the hallway with Grim, where they bumped into Ace. “Morning, Ace.”

“Morning, Yu.” Ace looked much better than he had earlier. They’d ended up putting him on the sofa in the lounge, but even so, it looked like he’d been able to get decent sleep. He marched toward the door and yanked it open like he was the dorm warden.

“Gah! Deuce!” Ace exclaimed.

“I figured I’d find you here,” Deuce said, standing on the other side of the door in the still-pale morning light. He peeked around Ace. “Morning, Yu, Grim.” Then he stared at Ace in exasperation. “I heard from the other guys that you snuck a piece of the housewarden’s tart, and then he put a collar on you?” He snorted with laughter. “You really are an idiot.”

“Oh, shut up!” Ace snapped. “Like you’re one to talk.”

“What are you going to do about class today? You’ll be in a real pinch if you can’t use magic, huh? Honestly. Why did you even come to an arcane

academy in the first place?” Deuce teased with a grin, almost as if getting his sweet revenge for everything Ace had pulled so far.

Even Grim laughed at him, saying, “The school could always use another janitor!”

But Ace didn’t put up a fight. Perhaps he’d been thinking the same thing himself. Groaning, he glared at Deuce. “So what? You came to take some potshots?”

“I don’t have that kind of time either,” Deuce told him. “I came to get you. The honor student always lends a hand to the fallen classmate, right?”

“Why are you always so annoying?” Ace rolled his eyes. “And thanks but no thanks. I was already going to go say sorry.”

Deuce swept an arm forward, invitingly. “So then let’s head back to the dorm.”

Ace stepped outside, and Yuya decided to watch them go from the entryway. Last night, he hadn’t been sure how things would end up, but it seemed like it was all going to work out.

“What?” Ace looked back at him unhappily as Yuya stood in the doorway, grinning. “Get a move on, Yu.”

“Huh?” Yuya’s eyebrows shot up. “You want me to go with you?”

“You were the one who said I should apologize,” Ace said. “So what, you just gonna abandon me?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Yuya shook his head. “It’s just, do you need me? Won’t you be okay by yourself, Ace?”

“You’re going to school anyway,” Ace told him. “Two birds, one stone.”

He felt nervous at the idea of watching someone apologize, especially to the terrifying Riddle. He would have preferred not to have anything to do with it, but with Ace pestering him, it didn’t seem like he could really say no. When he begrudgingly agreed, Ace laughed. “Yaah!”

Deuce cocked his head to one side as he watched this exchange curiously. “Were you guys like this yesterday, too?”

“Like what?” Ace demanded.

“I dunno.” Deuce shrugged. “You seem sorta buddy-buddy.”

“It’s all in your head.” Ace abruptly changed the subject, as if to shake Deuce off. “If we keep standing here staring off into space, class’ll start on us. C’mon, let’s go already.”

Yuya asked Grim what he was going to do, and the monster leaped outside, seemingly raring to go.

“I’m coming! I wanna see this ... Harslarule, too!” Grim shouted.

“It’s Heartslabyul.” Ace poked Grim in the side.

“Wait till you guys see our dorm! It’s gonna blow you away!” Deuce said, bursting with delight. “Get ready for it.” With a proud smile on his face, he turned toward Grim and Yuya and thumped his chest.



ACE, DEUCE, GRIM, AND YUYA made their way over to the Hall of Mirrors. They didn't encounter anyone other than the ghosts out and about, likely because it was still early.

The Hall of Mirrors was a small building; Yuya had seen it from the top of the stairs two days before. Inside, seven mirrors faced one another in a circle. The group slipped through one decorated with cards and roses.

"W-w-wow!" Grim cried out as the scene around them changed.

Even Yuya found himself murmuring, "This is amazing."

The scene before their eyes was astonishingly beautiful. He inhaled deeply the fresh, verdant fragrance of trees, the scent settling at the bottom of his lungs. He could also catch the faintest hint of sweetness in the smell and belatedly realized it was the fragrance of the roses blooming wildly around them.

"That there's Heartslabyul's famed rose maze." Ace pointed at the rows of beautifully trimmed hedges, which folded in on themselves and stretched so far Yuya couldn't see where they ended. "I haven't gone into it yet myself. As soon as we started school, the upperclassmen told us we shouldn't go in until we've learned basic flight. They said we'd be in real trouble if we got lost, so I guess it's probably pretty huge."

The hedges reached up to Yuya's shoulder and were neatly shaped into straight lines with not a twig out of place. The morning dew on the rich, lustrous green leaves shone and sparkled, dazzling the eye. Crisp, clear

sunlight poured down from above, and even the color of the sky seemed different from that of the one above Ramshackle Dorm.

“Dang, this place is swank!” Grim said. “This is nothing like our dumpster of a dorm.”

“It’s almost absurd to even compare them,” Yuya responded. He could see a large building up ahead on the brick path. With red walls and a castle-like exterior, it seemed different yet again from the main school building. So that was the dorm?

Large, sturdy bushes bearing bright-red roses in bloom lined both sides of the path. Yuya looked closely and noticed that each and every one of the bushes was pruned into the shape of a heart.

“Aww, yeah, I am getting my paint on!” came a voice from inside the garden. “They all gotta be red, or it’s off with my head!”

Curious, Yuya stopped abruptly. He had heard this line somewhere before but couldn’t remember its origin. As he continued pondering the words, the owner of the voice appeared and caught sight of him.

“Huh? Hold the phone ...” a boy with orange hair said, peering at Yuya. Their eyes met, and the boy’s were a green similar to the leaves of the roses surrounding them.

“Aah, I *knew* it!” the boy said, looking extremely pleased with himself, his eyes suddenly sparkling. “Mr. No Magic from orientation!”

“H-hi,” Yuya stammered. “Good morning.”

The boy walked over to the group, a smile on his face as he pinned Ace with a look. “And *you’re* the first-year who totes destroyed the billion-thaumark chandelier! Plus, from the look of that collar around your neck, I’d say you’re also the brave soul who ate Riddle’s tart last night, huh?”

“I could seriously do without the list of shame!” Ace’s shoulders slumped, but the other boy appeared to pay this no mind as he clapped a hand on Deuce’s shoulder.

“Lucky me!” he laughed. “You guys are *the* hot topic on campus, and here you are banging my door down first thing in the morning! Hey, let’s get a selfie real quick for Magicam?”

“Umm, sure.” Yuya stared, baffled. “But who are you?”

“Oh! Cater Diamond. I’m a third-year here at Heartslabyul. You can call me Cater. Or Cay-Cay if you’re cray-cray!”

The words tumbled out of Cater, a boy with kind, slightly downturned eyes and a grown-up air. The top part of his orange hair was pulled back, and the tendrils of hair framing the sides of his face reinforced the gentle impression he made. Like Ace and Deuce, he had a playing card suit painted on his right cheek—a diamond.

He turned the front camera on his phone toward them, crouched down, and brought his face so close to Yuya that his diamond mark almost touched his cheek. Cater was clearly not shy or afraid to get up close and personal. The unfamiliar touch of someone his own age made Yuya jump a little.

“Cheese!” Cater called, and Yuya heard the click of the photo being taken. “I’ll tag you on Magicam. Gimme your names.”

Yuya assumed Magicam was some kind of social media app. Ace and Deuce introduced themselves, followed by Yuya and Grim.

“Acey and Deucey. And then Yuey and Grimmy, huh? Okay, posted!” Cater tucked his phone into his pocket and smiled warmly. The canines peeking out from behind his upper lip gave his face a friendly feel. “So, listen, you kids came at the *perfect* moment, huh? It’s like destiny or something. You wanna help me paint some roses?”

Yuya wasn’t the only one cocking his head to one side in confusion. “Paint some roses?”

“Yup!” Cater nodded and pointed back at one of the heart-shaped bushes, which bore red roses, like all the others.

“Hm?” Deuce looked at it and frowned. “Hey. Check out the top. It’s ... kinda weird?”

Yuya looked up and saw white roses blooming on the red-rose bush for some reason. Wait—he looked more closely and saw the top half of the petals were red, while the bottom half were white. It wasn’t actually a red-rose bush. “By ‘paint,’ you can’t seriously mean ...” He stared at Cater in amazement.

“Is this a white-rose tree?” Ace was also surprised. “You’re painting the flowers red?!”

“Exactly!” Cater bobbed his head up and down, and then frowned in frustration. “I’ve had my head tilted back at the sky since I woke up, and man, my neck is so sore. But heads are gonna roll if these don’t get painted before the party tomorrow, so ...” He shrugged.

“Why bother painting them?” Yuya asked, and Cater grinned like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Party-day roses just have to be red! They’re so much more photogenic. Or something?”

“Photogenic.” Deuce looked like it wasn’t quite clicking for him. “I don’t get it. You’re deliberately changing the color of the roses with magic? That is next-level perfectionism.”

“You bet it is.” Cater winked. “But the thing is, I also have to get things ready for the croquet tournament, and *that* means coloring all the flamingos. I’m busy as a little beaver here! I’d seriously be so happy to get you guys on board.”

“You’re colorin’ flamingos now?” Grim stared at Cater. “Isn’t anything the right color around here?!”

“It’s got to be done, 100 percent,” Cater told him. “I mean, tomorrow’s our dorm’s traditional unbirthday party, after all.”

“Unbirthday party?” Yuya looked at Ace and Deuce, but they both shrugged and cocked their heads to one side.

“No clue,” Ace said.

“Oh, whoa.” Cater threw his head back in surprise. “You kids haven’t heard the good word? The unbirthday party’s a formal high tea party, a tradition passed down through the generations at Heartslabyul. We pick a day that’s not anyone’s birthday and hold it whenever the mood strikes the housewarden.”

“That’s a thing? Did you know about this?” Ace whispered to Deuce.

“Nope. I was already getting this vibe, but I’m feeling pretty sure now that we got ourselves into a very weird dorm,” Deuce whispered back.

Cater patted them on their backs. “At any rate, I need those roses to be red. Like, yesterday. Deucey, Grimmy, I’ll show you how to do it with magic. You just follow my lead!” Cater turned to Yuya. “Yuey, Acey. Since you kids can’t use magic, you better stick to paint, ’kay?”

“Nghah.” Ace reluctantly accepted the can of paint from Cater, no doubt sensing the impossibility of saying no to such a persistent request from an upperclassman. Yuya also took a can and a brush and started painting the roses on one side of the path.

Meanwhile, Cater used magic to change the color of one rose after another. He pointed his magical pen at a white rose, and particles of light

enveloped it, then popped away like popcorn, leaving a red rose.

“Hm hmm hm hm hm hmmm!” he hummed all the while, so Yuya assumed the spell was a pretty simple one for him.

It was not so easy for Deuce and Grim. When they tried to cast the spell, sometimes nothing happened, and other times, the flower changed to a color other than red. It was an uphill struggle.

“Myaah! It turned pink!” Grim exclaimed.

“Ugh. I got green here,” Deuce groaned.

“Not pink, not green, not aquamarine!” Cater waved a disapproving finger at them. “It’s rose red or nothing.”

Ace sulked as he ran his brush across the flower petals, grumbling, “This is so annoying! If I could use magic, I’d crush Deuce at this.”

“Dunno about that.” Deuce smirked. “Talk is cheap, pal.”

“Huh?” Ace glared at him. “What’d you say?”

“Yeah, yeah. Simmer down, you guys!” Cater looked at Yuya quietly painting the roses. “Yuey, you’re my big guns here. Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Yuya said simply, and looked at Deuce’s and Grim’s failed roses. A rainbow of colors dotted the white petals, leaving them in a curious state. “Using magic’s pretty tough, huh?”

“Mmm.” Cater nodded. “That’s how it is with the newbs, though. They’ll be totes okay if they work on their imagination.”

“Imagination?” Yuya frowned.

“Yup! You gotta think about the nitty-gritty, y’know? Like, what kind of magic are you using? What does it do? And the most important question of all—what do you want to happen? Creating a real vivid picture of all that stuff in your head makes your magic more accurate. Or if you look at it the other way, you’re never gonna get magic to do its thing for you if you can’t really picture it in your head.”

“Oh, I get it.” Yuya nodded, satisfied. You couldn’t cast a spell without a specific image in mind. That was probably why Deuce hadn’t been able to make his magic work in the Enchanted Mine. He’d been too panicked to focus on that mental image.

“Well, there are all kinds of other restrictions, too,” Cater said cryptically, then twirled his magical pen and tucked it away in his pocket as they got back to work.

Before Yuya knew it, all the roses as far as the eye could see were red. Ace and Deuce had decided that rose painting was a new way for them to compete, and the work had progressed quickly after that.

“Good job, gang!” Cater gave them air high fives. “You totally saved Cay-Cay’s bacon!”

“Aah, I’m beat,” Grim groaned. “All that standing on my tippy-toes. My legs are killin’ me.”

“Me, too. With all that looking up at the roses, my neck’s half-broken.” Ace hung his head, pushing down the large collar. “This is seriously the worst.”

“By. The. Way.” Cater clapped his hands to punctuate each word. “Acey? Does the fact that you came straight here instead of going to class mean you’re looking for Riddle?”

“Oh.” Ace met Yuya’s eyes and pursed his lips as he nodded and admitted, “I was the one who ate his tart, so, like, maybe that was my bad? Sorta like maybe I should say sorry or something.”

“Look at you, getting right to it!” Cater cried, gleefully. “Did you bring an apology tart?”

“An apology tart?” Ace’s eyes widened at the unexpected words. “Uh, no? I came here first thing. I got nothing.”

“What?!” Cater lamented, theatrically throwing his hands up into the air. “Ooh, yeaah, that’s gonna be a problem. Total conflict with the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 53—‘Stolen items must be replaced.’”

“Huh?” Ace gaped at him. “Rule what?”

“Sorry.” Cater shrugged apologetically. “If you’re not in compliance, I can’t let you in.”

“Huh?! After we helped you and everything?!” Ace yelled.

“Them’s the breaks, kid. All dorm residents must obey the rules. If I let you slide, it’d be off with my head next.”

“As if!” Ace reached out to grab him, but Cater nimbly danced away.

“Ace!” Yuya called out.

“Give it up.” Deuce caught hold of the hem of Ace’s uniform to stop him. “You can’t go flying off the handle again today. Not after yesterday.”

Setting fire to one of the Great Seven statues. Destroying a billion-thaumark chandelier. If he followed these accomplishments up with an attack on an upperclassman before the furor had even died down, the

expulsion he'd just narrowly avoided might be enacted for real this time. Yuya and Deuce explained the situation to him, and Ace gritted his teeth in frustration.

"Do make sure you bring that tart next time, mkay? We'll welcome you with open arms!" Cater waved and disappeared into the dorm while Ace stamped his feet helplessly.

"Ugh! He knew from the second he saw me that I was totally tartless. He just wanted to make us paint his stupid roses. Gotta keep my guard up around that guy."

"Hang on a sec. Why was I even paintin' roses, anyway?" Grim said with a dawning awareness. "All I got for it was exhaustion! Ace, apologize. Right this second!"

"Shut your trap," Ace snarled. "Don't go using that word with me now."

Yuya ignored their bickering and asked Deuce what time it was. The other boy looked at his phone and gasped.

"Cripes!" he cried. "Class is starting in, like, two minutes. We gotta get going!"

"Yeah, we better hustle," Yuya agreed. "It'll look bad if we're late."

"For real? That's it? I'm going to class with this collar?" Ace sighed at length while the others dragged him away, leaving Heartslabyul behind.

"Food! Food, food." Grim delightedly held up a tray laden with lunch. They'd managed to get through the completely incomprehensible History of Magic class, and it was finally time to eat, but Yuya's mind was still fixed on what had happened in class.

Their instructor Mozus Trein had singled Yuya out at the end of class, telling him to stay behind. Trein was a distinguished middle-aged man with bits of white starting to show in his ash gray hair. He carried around a cat named Lucius that looked like someone had smushed its face in, and he gently petted his beloved cat during class occasionally, as though seeking comment from it.

When he spoke briskly about history, he had seemed quite strict, but his voice as he spoke to Yuya then was unexpectedly gentle.

"The headmage told me about your situation. I'm sure you must be having trouble following my class, as you are beginning with zero

knowledge. Read this.” Trein handed him a book that was a general survey of the history of this world.

Like Crewel and Vargas the day before, he was dealing with the nonmagical Yuya as just another student, rather than treating him as something special. Yuya appreciated this and thought all the teachers there were good people.

His grades back home had never been stellar, but they hadn’t been bad, either. For instance, the book he’d been given might have been a thick, weighty tome, but if he put his mind to it, he could probably catch up, more or less. He began to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

But he still felt a cloud of gloom hanging over him. The more pressing issue at the moment was the lunchtime that loomed before him. He recalled the previous day and the uncomfortable hour when the other students had carefully kept their distance. The almost painfully sharp glances they had shot him. The obvious whispers. If Deuce hadn’t come along, he was sure he would have felt crushed under their gazes and fled the cafeteria.

Would he have to endure that same awkwardness again today? The chicken sauté before him looked delicious, but his stomach hurt for a reason other than hunger.

“Another delish lunch spread!” Grim said as he plopped himself down at the middle of a large table, without paying the least bit of attention to the world around them. The students seated nearby quickly retreated like sparrows that’d had a rock thrown into their flock.

Yuya nervously sat beside him. “Must be nice to be you, Grim. You don’t seem to care at all what other people think.”

“Other people?” A daring smile rose on his face, and Grim deftly wedged a fork in between his paw pads. “Worrying about that stuff’s not gonna fill my belly. This chicken in front of me’s way, way more crucial. Time! To! Eat!” He dove into his lunch with a look of utter contentment, chewing with his mouth open and scattering sauce everywhere.

“Oh, come on.” Yuya wiped the table with a napkin and accidentally met the eyes of a group seated at a table farther ahead. Their faces twisted up into sneers, and he immediately hung his head. He could hear giggles and whispered laughter, mocking him.

“I heard that normie already got called into Trein’s office,” one student scoffed.

“For real? I guess there really is no way for a loser who can’t use magic to actually be a student here, huh?” another smirked.

“He’s ruining everything. I mean, as students of Night Raven College, we’re getting lumped in with a guy like that! It’s embarrassing.”

The cold, pointed ill will around him shot through Yuya mercilessly like barbs. However small each individual needle might have been, they rained down on him endlessly, and it hurt, scaring him. He couldn’t lift his face.

He’d lived his whole life doing his best to avoid fights and incurring anyone’s hatred. How could he possibly have known how to handle having the entire student body ridicule him?

Should he get mad at them? Should he just ignore it as stupid and pointless? The whole situation left him paralyzed. Blood drained from his limbs, leaving them numb, and his ears grew hot, as if they were on fire.

Just when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore, someone sat down in front of him, as if to block the judgmental voices and hard eyes. He lifted his face, wondering if Deuce had come to join him again, and vivid, terracotta hair leaped into his field of view. Ace.

“What,” he said, perhaps sensing something in Yuya’s gaze. But he didn’t bother to wait for his reply, instead beginning to chatter. “That’s one pathetic look you’ve got on your face. And, like, you don’t actually think I’m here to save you from those guys, right? Well, let me kick that idea out of your head. I just sat here ’cause the seat was empty. Don’t go getting all googly-eyed on me. I was just walking by. No big.” He picked up his spoon. “But, man, whispering behind someone’s back without looking ’em straight in the face is pretty sad! For real. If you don’t like a guy, come right out and make fun of him to his face.”

Ace very deliberately looked around, and the chatter stopped, leaving silence in its wake. The only sounds that could be heard were him sipping from his spoon and Grim chewing chicken.

“Woo-hoo! This is so good!” Grim had been shoveling food into his mouth in a trance, and now he swallowed loudly and patted his stomach. “That pasta there looks real tasty, too.”

“Paws off, weasel!” Ace batted his paw away. “Yu, hurry up and eat. Not my fault if Grim steals your lunch.”

“Oh! There you are!” Deuce wove his way through the crowd and came to stand immediately in front of them. “This place is jammed again today, huh? I couldn’t decide between the carbonara or the chicken. Lost a lot of time there.” He sat down next to Ace in a natural motion.

“Hey, whoa.” Ace glared up at him. “Now I have to look at your ugly mug when I’m eating, too?”

“I’m not happy about it, either,” Deuce told him. “Actually, could you maybe just stay away from us? That collar really sticks out. People are gonna think we’re rule breakers, too.”

“Shut it! And anyway, the second you smashed up that chandelier, you were a rule breaker, too. The one who says ‘loser’ is the loser!” Ace stuck out his tongue.

“Ngh!” Deuce reeled slightly. “No, it’s not too late. I’ll show you. I’m going to turn myself into a magnificent honor student.”

Ace and Deuce carried on with their usual squabbling, growing louder and causing a bigger ruckus than when they’d been whispering earlier. For once, though, Yuya didn’t mind it in the least.

“Thanks, Ace, Deuce,” he said with a shy smile.

“What for?” Ace stared at him blankly. “You’re a weirdo.”

“How come you said Ace first?” Deuce protested. “*I’m* first.”

Yuya could still feel the sneers and stares. In fact, they seemed to grow all the worse with the assemblage of the team who had caused yesterday’s chaos, but Yuya no longer felt that stabbing pain. Surprised at how easy it was to smile now, he thanked Ace and Deuce again.



While the four of them proceeded with lunch, someone grabbed the chair next to Ace and asked, “Mind if I sit here?”

“Oh, no.” Yuya shook his head. “Go ahead.”

This newcomer must have been pretty brave. He had short, ivy green hair and black-framed glasses. A club symbol was painted on his left cheek.

“That mark ...” Yuya stared.

Ace had explained to him during a break that Heartslabyul students were required to draw one of the card suits on their faces. They were given a suit by the housewarden after orientation. So did that mean this boy was in the same dorm as Ace and Deuce?

Before he could ask, a familiar face popped up from behind the boy in glasses.

“You guys stick out like sore thumbs,” the orange-haired boy said merrily. “Saved us the trouble of looking for you.”

“Ah! You!” Ace jolted back in his chair.

“Good job this morning, Acey. And the rest of you.” Cater waved a fluttery hand. “You look good, real hot.”

Ace turned his face away with a sniff and twirled his fork in his spaghetti, looking bored. “Real hot? Whatever. You used us and then chased us away.”

“Now, now.” Cater smiled as he sat down. “Don’t be in such a snit. I mean, ol’ Cay-Cay here didn’t want to chase you cutie-pies away—not really, y’know? But, like, this scary vice housewarden here, he tells me to jump, I gotta say how high—ngh!”

“Hey. Watch your mouth.” The boy in glasses smiled awkwardly, while Cater put on a transparent show of weeping.

“Vice housewarden?” Yuya asked Ace and Deuce, but they showed no signs of surprise, only nodding at the question.

“Mm-hmm. Nice to meet you. I’m Trey Clover.” The boy in glasses smiled at him. “A third-year like Cater. I’m Heartslabyul’s vice housewarden. Sorry our Ace caused you all that trouble yesterday.”

His voice was gentle. Had he sought Yuya out just to make this apology?

When Yuya shrank back, he laughed and said playfully, “Ah, well. I also wanted to check out the guys from that dump of a—ah, I mean, the *rustic* dorm.”

“Don’t let your guard down, Yu.” Ace wagged his spoon in front of him. “The housewarden’s the one picking the vice housewarden, after all. You hear me?”

“Hey, don’t be rude to Clover!” Deuce said, jabbing him, but Ace was clearly holding firm to his grudge over the events of that morning.

“And anyway, you’re late to the party, Trey,” Ace sniffed. “I got chased out of Heartslabyul, and you didn’t come running after me then!”

Trey only lowered his eyebrows and smiled.

“Hey, so,” Grim cut in, looking up at Trey, “what even is a vice housewarden?”

“Our housewarden ...” Trey started. “You all know him, right? Riddle Rosehearts.” Grim and Ace both pulled sour faces. “I guess you could say the vice housewarden’s like his assistant. Although Riddle doesn’t actually need an assistant.”

The fact that he had a title likely meant that Trey was a peacemaker among the students. Yuya felt like he understood why Deuce had looked nervous.

The Heartslabyul housewarden. The vice housewarden. Yuya had a sudden realization and timidly said, “That reminds me. What other dorms are there besides Heartslabyul?”

“No way.” Just as he’d feared, Ace gaped at him. “You don’t even know *that*?”

“S-sorry.” He hung his head.

“It’s fine, all good.” Cater winked at him. “You’re like the white rabbit. You don’t know a single thing. It’s totes adorbs. Cay-Cay and Trey’ll tell you everything you need to know! So you know the statues of the Great Seven on Main Street, yeah? Our school has seven dorms in honor of them. There’s Heartslabyul—that’s our dorm.” Cater chanted as he used a finger to write on the table with magic:

Heartslabyul Dorm

Modeled after the strictness of the Queen of Hearts

Savanaclaw Dorm

Based on the persistent spirit of the King of Beasts

Octavinelle Dorm

Based on the benevolent heart of the Sea Witch

Scarabia Dorm

Based on the mindful personality of the Sorcerer of the Sands

Pomefiore Dorm

Based on the tenacity of the Fairest Queen

Ignihyde Dorm

Based on the diligence of the King of the Underworld

Diasomnia Dorm

Based on the noble spirit of the Thorn Fairy

“That’s all seven of ’em. You saw the Dark Mirror at orientation, yeah? That thing looks at the essence of a new student’s soul and decides which dorm’s best for them.”

Cater blew a puff of air at the glittering letters on the table. The words scattered and disappeared like a pile of sand.

“Oh! I wasn’t—” Yuya started.

“All those names are way too long!” Grim shouted, almost as if speaking for Yuya, and ran a paw over his ears. “How’s anyone supposed to remember ’em?”

“Well, you get the idea.” Cater laughed. “Want to or not, you’ll learn them soon enough.”

Yuya and Grim looked anxious, and Trey offered them a reassuring smile. “It’s okay. It’s pretty easy to figure out who’s in which dorm. They have different colored armbands and magestones on their magical pens. We wear the black and red of the Queen of Hearts’ dress—red-and-black armbands and crimson magestones.”

“Even if you can’t tell by the colors or whatever, soon enough you’ll get who’s who just from meeting them,” Cater said. “Each of the dorms has a totally different vibe.”

“Right.” Trey nodded. “You already know about our Heartslabyul Dorm?”

“Nope, no idea,” Ace spat. “I mean, what even is it? Those weird rules, the Queen of Hearts’ whatever. Unbirthday parties, painting roses. Makes zero sense to me.”

“I can’t believe you,” Deuce hissed. “How can you be so rude to upperclassmen?”

“Okay, then.” Ace gave him a hard look. “Are you saying you’re 100 percent on board with that weird task, Deuce?”

“That’s—I mean.” Deuce looked troubled and glanced at Trey like he was having trouble actually saying the words.

Cater watched this with amusement. "You think it's weird?"

Deuce sent his eyes racing around the room. "Um. It's like ..."

"Ha ha ha! That face! You're a total truth teller, Deucey! I love it."

"C'mon, don't go teasing the new kids too much," Trey said reprovably, and cleared his throat. "Heartslabyul is an homage to the spirit of the Queen of Hearts. By tradition, our students live according to the rules she created."

"And she had 810 rules in all! ♪" Cater sang.

"Eight hundred and ten?!" Ace and Deuce cried in unison, looking at each other.

"And we follow them," Ace murmured.

"Can I even remember them all?" Deuce said.

"Myah ha ha! Your dorm's pretty rigid!" Grim pointed at them, guffawing.

Now that Grim had been officially accepted as a student, he'd broken free of his longing for the other dorms. For the past day, he'd really connected with the ghosts who lived with them and had been crowing, "My Ramshackle Dorm's the best." Yuya was just glad he was accepting their shared life.

"No *rules* in Ramshackle Dorm. Plus, we've got free rein of the *whole* building," he boasted. "When I get back there today, I'm gonna clear the second floor and make my room *shine*!"

Ace looked at him with jealous eyes. "Ah. Heartslabyul's super rough."

"Actually, the rules are basically just an old tradition. Like, if I had to say, Heartslabyul's motto? It's more of a vibe," Cater said with a bittersweet smile. "How strictly we follow that tradition depends on the housewarden. Past wardens have been much more lax."

"Riddle, though?" Trey shook his head. "He doesn't mess around. He strictly enforces the Queen of Hearts' rules."

"The real wild part about Riddley is how he gets all the dorm students to obey the super strict system," Cater noted.

"That doesn't make it okay for him to put this collar around my neck just for eating a slice of tart! It's not right," Ace said, and drank down his glass of water. "If you're talking wild, it's wild how narrow minded and controlling he is."

“Hmph. So I’m narrow minded and controlling?”

“Yup!” Ace nodded, emphatically. “Blowing right past strict, straight into tyranny.”

“Ace!” Yuya tried to stop him, but he was too late.

“Bwah?!” Ace looked back and froze. “H-Housewarden.” He leaped to his feet like someone had dumped boiling water on him.

Behind him, the housewarden of Heartslabyul himself, Riddle, stood with his arms crossed. Tucking his fiery red hair behind his ear, he asked, “And?” Gray eyes blinked slowly under the fan of lush eyelashes. The rest of his face was made up of more delicate features, and if Yuya was pushed to describe them, he would admit they were ephemeral and beautiful. The outrage that had colored Riddle’s face the other day seemed like an impossibility. But as ever, his intensity belied his slender frame.

“Hey, Riddle!” Cater grinned. “What’s shakin’, pal? You’re lookin’ adorbs as always! ♪”

“Hmph,” Riddle sniffed disdainfully. “Cater, keep running that mouth and you’ll lose it—along with the rest of your head.”

“Sorry, sorry!” Cater waved apologetic hands. “My bad!”

Riddle turned his gaze to Yuya and Grim next. “Oh ho, you two.”

“Oh! Uh, hi. I’m—” Yuya started, only to be cut off by a dismissive wave of Riddle’s hand.

“Yu and Grim, yes? I heard you’d been accepted to our school.” He shook his head ruefully. “What could the headmage possibly have been thinking? Tolerating rule breakers such as yourselves. Incredible.”

“Bleh!” Grim stuck his tongue out, and Yuya slapped both of his hands over his mouth.

“Quit it,” he whispered so quietly that only Grim could hear. “You wanna end up like that again?” They glanced at the collar around Ace’s neck, and its wearer gave them a pained smile.

“So, uh, listen,” Ace said. “Housewarden, sir?”

“What is it?” Riddle said.

Ace pursed his lips and rubbed his hands together. “Any chance I could get you to remove this collar?”

“Of course. I had intended to remove it for you.”

“For real?!”

“Once you’d taken an opportunity to reflect upon your crimes, at any rate.” Riddle poked at the collar around Ace’s neck. “But I’ve not detected so much as a hint of remorse in the foolishness I’ve heard you spout today, so I think I’ll let that stay on for a while.”

“What?!” Ace cried. “But I’ve got classes.”

“No need to worry.” Riddle waved a dismissive hand. “The first term for first-years is more focused on magical theory than practice. They’re all foundational classes, so your inability to use magic shouldn’t be a problem at all. If you know anything of shame, however, you might be slightly bothered, but I suppose that is what we call reaping what you sow.”

“But—!” Ace’s face fell. His head looked very heavy as he slumped in disappointment. Continuing to wear the collar would be rough for him both mentally and physically, but Riddle shook his head, clearly done with that conversation.

“Now, if you’ve finished your meal, you should quit gossiping and prepare for your next class. You know what would happen if you were to break the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 271—‘One must leave the table within fifteen minutes of completing one’s lunch’—don’t you?”

“Gah! And there we go with another weird rule,” Ace muttered.

“What do you say?!” Riddle rebuked in a voice that could be heard at the farthest end of the cafeteria.

“Yes, Housewarden!” Ace and Deuce leaped to their feet and cried out together.

“Very well, then. Trey, you are the vice housewarden,” Riddle said. “I trust you will keep an eye on the new students’ manners.”

“Yup.” Trey nodded. “I will be sure to do that.”

“I’ll be on my way then.” Riddle whirled around, turning his back to them. “As per the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 339—‘The postmeal beverage is to be lemon tea with two sugar cubes’—I must go to acquire sugar cubes from the shop.”

His loafers echoed against the floor as he left the cafeteria. Instantly, Yuya heard sighs of relief from all around him.

One student whispered, “That guy really is weird. I mean, following the Queen of Hearts’ rules even outside of the dorm.”

“Aaah, I was so freaked. I accidentally broke the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 186—‘Never eat a hamburger on Tuesday.’ I don’t know what I would’ve

done if he'd caught me," another worried.

"I get that. I wish he wouldn't come here, so we could at least eat lunch in peace."

The whispers around him were not favorable, and Yu realized it wasn't just Ace as a new student who was unhappy with Riddle. Plenty of the others seemed just as frustrated.

"People really hate that Riddle guy," Grim said, not mincing words, and Trey and Cater winced.

"But Riddle's for real a great mage," Cater said. "With that signature spell of his, he's rock solid, pals. Not gonna be knocked off his perch by us!"

"Signature spell?" Grim frowned. "What's that?"

"Just what the name says," Trey said. "It's a particular spell unique to its user, although it's possible that more than one person can use the spell. But, well, it's rare for two people to have the same signature spell."

"His signature spell allows him to temporarily seal away the magic of another. You may have seen it in action?" Cater asked wryly.

"It's called ..." Grim screwed up his face and shook his head vigorously back and forth. "Off with Your Head!"

"Ugh. Man, the name alone is scary enough." Ace slumped down in his chair like he'd run out of steam and was just barely held up by the edge of his seat. "Come on. I mean, 'Off with Your Head'? Simmer down already."

"To a mage, losing your ability to use magic is about as painful as losing your head completely, y'know?" Cater said. "I think it's the absolute *perfect* name! ♪"

"Yeah, yeah. Definitely goes with that holier-than-thou attitude," Ace snarled somewhat rudely, given that he was talking about an upperclassman. Trey and Cater weren't angry, though—they merely smiled with slightly chastising looks.

Yuya wondered if they weren't annoyed by this reckless new student, but from the way they talked, he sensed they were making excuses for Riddle. Maybe they were used to these kinds of complaints.

"The way the housewarden was there," Ace said, "I don't stand a chance of getting back into the dorm unless I bring a tart, yeah? Queen of Hearts' ... Uh, help me out. Which rule was it again?"

“Rule 53,” Cater told him. ““Stolen items must be replaced.””

“Riddle always looks forward to having the first slice of tart,” Trey noted. “And it’s his right as housewarden. If you take that away from him, well, you’re not gonna get him to forgive you until you replace not just the bit you ate, but the entire tart.”

“True that.” Cater nodded. “I mean, we’re not happy about it either, but the rules are absolute.”

“You can’t really believe that!” Ace yelped.

“Nah, nah. This is real talk here.” Cater stared at Ace, surprisingly serious.

“Mm-hmm.” Trey agreed. “We would like to help you out somehow.”

“But it’s all talk.” Ace scratched his cheek, still looking angry, but a little apologetic too. “I don’t even have the money to buy a whole tart. There’s no way I can replace it anytime soon.”

“You’re golden!” Cater snapped his fingers, as if he’d been waiting for this very moment. “I’ve got the perfect idea! ♪”



“WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?” Deuce muttered the second they left the school. “This is just too much.” He looked up with a gasp and glanced at Yuya walking beside him. “Oh! I’m not complaining about Diamond or Clover, though.”

“It’s okay. I know,” Yuya reassured him. He had realized Deuce held upperclassmen in serious regard after seeing how polite he was with them in the cafeteria.

Which was exactly why Deuce seemed unable to make heads or tails of Ace and the way he had carried on and spoken to the upperclassmen so casually. “Ace is nothing but a giant headache,” he complained. “He has no chill, and he’s always fooling around. Doesn’t he have any pride as a Night Raven College student?”

“Yet you’re still helping him,” Yuya said with a smile. “Pretty nice of you, Deuce.”

Cater had informed them that Trey had made the delectable tart Ace had eaten. Trey’s family ran a patisserie, so his baking skills were way beyond those of the average high school student. And Riddle loved the sweets he made, so it would be vital to employ Trey’s expertise. It would be a bit of work, but any ingredients the students used to cook for themselves came out of the dorm’s budget, so they could make their apology tart for the price of their labor alone. Riddle was sure to forgive Ace if he brought a fantastic treat to the party the next day.

When Cater was done explaining his perfect idea, Ace had agreed enthusiastically. They would begin by gathering nuts in the woods for an authentic chestnut tart. Because they had been sitting at the same table, Yuya, Deuce, and Grim had gotten roped into the plan.

“You’re not actually going to leave me high and dry here, right? You wouldn’t be so heartless, not after we risked our lives together, yeah?” Ace had pleaded.

The other students couldn’t refuse him, and lured by the promise of a share of this tart, Grim went out to gather chestnuts with Ace after school, while Yuya and Deuce headed for the school shop to pick up the necessary ingredients.

It was no surprise that Yuya was going along with the plan, given that it was not in his nature to stir things up, but he never imagined that Deuce would help out with the tart project. He and Ace had been squabbling basically from the moment they had met. But now Yuya wondered if perhaps Deuce didn’t actually hate Ace. After all, he was being so nice now.

Yuya was already painfully aware of how, at this school, even the vaguest hint of someone being nice was incredibly precious and rare, so he was extra appreciative of it.

“No one’s ever called me nice before.” Deuce looked at him in surprise and quickly shook his head. “Now I feel kinda awkward. Look, it’s really great of you to say that, but that fact is, I couldn’t say no in front of Diamond and Clover.”

“I mean, you came looking for us in the cafeteria today, right?” Yuya pointed out. “I was really glad to see you.” Maybe Deuce sitting down with them the day before had been a coincidence, but today, he had very deliberately come looking for Yuya and Grim to sit with them.

“It was no big deal.” Deuce gave him an awkward smile. “I figured it’s the kind of thing an honor student would do.”

An honor student. Deuce had mentioned this concept often, almost like he had an abnormal fixation on being the quintessential normative and proper student.

“You were so pale the whole lunch hour yesterday, Yu. Since you said you came from another world, I thought maybe you couldn’t eat some things here.” He had apparently gotten the wrong idea about why Yuya had

looked unwell.. Deuce beat a fist against his own chest, full of confidence. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to hold back. It’s an honor student’s job to help classmates in trouble!”

“Umm. Yeah.” Yuya nodded. “Thanks.”

“Oh!” Deuce pointed at something. “Isn’t that it there, what Diamond and Clover were talking about?”

He was gesturing at a tree with a trunk that split halfway up, the remaining branches spreading out to the sides like spider legs. They’d been told this was a marker for the shop. Not far behind it stood a brick building, and a small hanging sign that read “Mister S’s Mystery Shop” came into view as they approached.

When Yuya and Deuce opened the door, they very quickly understood the shop’s name; the interior was jammed with items with unknown purposes and applications—bizarre masks, clouded bottles with invisible contents, and a range of vases in all sizes, as well as an ancient piano that definitely did not look like it was for sale.

At last, Yuya spotted the notebooks and pencils he’d expect in a school shop, but immediately next to these were necklaces and rings that glittered under the yellow-green illumination. It was an eccentric assortment of goods to have in the middle of campus and was charged with a mysterious atmosphere. The shop was completely silent, with no sign of anyone else around.

“Um, hello?” Yuya craned his neck forward and called into the shop.

A creeping shadow slithered up from his feet.

“Ciao, my stray imps. You looking for something?” said a stylish young man as he stepped out of the gloom at the back of the shop. He was sporting black-and-purple locs beneath a patched top hat, matching the description Trey had given them. This was Sam, the shopkeeper. Sam wore white gloves and a small mask brooch that looked like the other masks in the shop. Yuya felt like he met the brooch’s eyes for a second, and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Um, we’re making a—” Deuce began.

“In stock now!” Before Deuce could finish speaking, Sam pulled out paper bags and set them on the counter. When the two boys looked inside, they were baffled to see the bags were already packed with the exact

amounts—nothing more, nothing less—of what Trey had told them to buy: cream, white sugar, eggs, and the rest of their required ingredients.

“How?” Yuya asked, surprised. “We didn’t even tell you what we needed yet.”

“Easy-peasy. A little bird told me.” Sam snapped his fingers, and in the next instant, cards appeared wedged between his white-gloved fingers. Black paper printed with the silhouette of a hat in purple—the shop’s business card. “I arrange for everything you little imps desire.” He tucked one card into Yuya’s breast pocket and placed the other in Deuce’s hand, and then sidled up to stand beside them.

“Will there be anything else?” He arched an eyebrow. “Might be good to have some extra cream just in case. How about the latest in mixers? Maybe a flying saucer to carry your groceries? All on sale now at a special price!”

“N-no, thank you!” Deuce set his money down on the counter and practically snatched up the bags with their purchases. He reached out to Yuya, who assumed Deuce was going to hand him one of the bags, but instead Deuce grabbed his shirt and yanked him away. “Thank you very much! Come on, Yu, let’s get going!”

“Oh! Okay.” Yuya looked back at Sam as he was dragged out of the shop. “Thank you!”

“Nee hee hee!” Sam’s laugh had a mysterious quality to it, and he was entirely unbothered by their hurried exit. “Very well, then. Until next time, my little imps! Do come again!”

Sam fluttered a hand in a wave at them as Yuya and Deuce left the shop.

“That was a close one.” Deuce let out a sigh of relief. “I thought he was going to charm us out of everything we had!”

“That was some serious upselling, huh?” Yuya replied, as they started back toward the cafeteria kitchen where Trey was waiting. Ace and Grim should be just about done collecting chestnuts, too.

“I’ve heard he’s *very* convincing,” Deuce warned him. “Someone told me you can go in to buy a single carton of milk, and you’ll end up walking out with five, even though you know you can’t drink them all. But when he tells you it’s cheaper to buy in bulk, you just sort of go along with him for some reason.”

His tone had the desperate tinge of lived experience to it. Noticing the curious look on Yuya's face, Deuce blushed. "Aah. The truth is, when I was little, my mom and I used to— Watch out!"

Distracted by the conversation with Deuce, Yuya felt something slam into his shoulder, and he suddenly found himself flat on the ground.

"Yu!" Worried, Deuce crouched down beside him. "Are you okay?"

Nothing hurt except for the hand he'd landed on. He pulled over the bag he'd dropped. "Forget me," he said, as he nervously opened the bag. "Aaah, the eggs ..." The *crack* he'd heard a second ago hadn't been his imagination. Two of the six eggs were cracked.

"I knew it." He sighed. "Sorry, Deuce. The eggs are broken."

"Eggs?" a low voice said.

They looked back to find three students glaring at them.

"Who cares about your eggs?" One of the boys grabbed Yuya's lapels and yanked him to his feet. "What are you going to do about my shoulder?"

"Uhhh," Yuya said. "Ummmm."

"You've got a lot of nerve running into us," another boy snarled. "And then you don't even ask if we're okay—you just worry about your stupid eggs."

"Ah, ow, ouch! My arm's maybe broken." The third boy rubbed the arm he had apparently deliberately bumped against Yuya, and Yuya noticed a yellow-and-black band around it. This boy was bigger than either him or Deuce, and given that his uniform had none of the new crispness of Yuya's to it, he was probably an upperclassman.

"This'll need treatment." He grinned. "*Expensive* treatment."

"B-b-but I don't have any money," Yuya protested.

"Well then, how're you gonna make this right?" The boy loomed closer to him. "Hm?"

Yuya was about to apologize when Deuce stopped him. "Hold up," he said, stepping forward and grabbing the wrist of the boy holding Yuya's shirt. "Please let him go. You're the ones who darted out at us from the side path, were you not?"

"Hey," the boy said, glaring at him. "What did you just say?"

"We apologize for bumping into you," Deuce continued. "But you were all fooling around and not paying attention to where you were going."

“Who do you think you are? Pretty big talk for a first-year.” The other boys took a step toward Deuce.

“D-Deuce, just leave it,” Yuya begged him.

Deuce frowned. “They’re the ones who came out at us from the side—”

As if to interrupt Deuce’s words, one of the upperclassmen stomped on the ground. *Krrsshk!*

“Whoopsy. My foot slipped.” He twisted his leather shoe back and forth on the ground, right on top of the paper bag of groceries they’d bought at the shop. Yuya didn’t have to look inside the crumpled, muddy, flattened mess to know what had become of the rest of the eggs. “I was dizzy from the shock of being slammed into by rude lowerclassmen.”

“Whoa! Poor babies. You’re terrible!” The boys laughed and slapped each other on the back.

Even Yuya, who’d avoided anything to do with fighting, could tell that they were the very picture of delinquents, and he knew the safest course of action was to not fight back and run away as soon as they could. Yuya fretted in silence, and Deuce’s hands shook.

“Hey, Deuce?” Yuya said, quietly. “Let’s just go. We can buy the ingredients again.”

“Apologize,” Deuce demanded, in a low voice.

“Huh?” Yuya was about to ask him to repeat what he’d said, but a quick glance at Deuce’s face made him flinch and pull back. A blue vein was throbbing on his forehead, and his expression was twisted up in such a terrifying rage Yuya almost doubted his eyes.

“I *told* you jerks to apologize. You got rocks in your ears or what?” Completely transformed, Deuce shoved the boy who had stomped on the eggs, then lunged forward and glared at his opponent, so close that their noses were practically touching.

Deuce radiated an intensity that Yuya would have previously considered unthinkable for him. It wasn’t anything like Riddle’s overwhelming aura, but there was a dangerous tension to him, like it was impossible to guess what he would do in the next instant—he was like a totally different person.

Yuya wasn’t the only one who was surprised. The upperclassmen’s jaws dropped in the face of Deuce’s anger.

“You human garbage,” Deuce growled. “Do know what you’ve done?”

“What?” One of the boys shrugged lightly. “Broke some eggs—”

“That’s right. You broke those eggs!” Deuce grabbed the boy’s collar and yanked him closer. “And those eggs, you see ... They may not have gotten to be little chickies, but they were gonna make some amazing tarts. You ripped that noble life away from them, and then you grin like fools about it!”

“Hey, hang on. Chickies? Deuce, calm down.” Yuya waved his arms to get his attention, but Deuce didn’t so much as glance his way. He was on the warpath now—the only thing in his field of view was the enemy.

“Six broken eggs,” Deuce said grimly. “If you don’t say you’re sorry, then you’re gettin’ a bruise for each one!”

“What is with this guy all of a sudden?” another boy laughed. “Like we’re gonna say sorry just because you start talking like some total weirdo!”

Something powerful shot forward so quickly Yuya’s eyes couldn’t follow it. There was a *thud*, and the boy in front of Deuce dropped to the ground. “That’s one,” Deuce said as he shook his fist out and looked down at the boy doubled over, clutching his stomach.

“This first-year ... He really hit him!” The other two were abruptly enraged.

All Yuya could do was stand there, rooted to the spot. Deuce was so still and calm that the violence before him didn’t feel real.

The boys were a full head taller than they were, and now they stared down at Yuya and Deuce with fearsome glares. The one who’d taken the punch staggered to his feet and readied his magical pen.

In both physique and number, the other side had the advantage. If this turned into a brawl, Yuya and Deuce would not make it out unscathed, and yet Deuce was still strangely collected for some reason. Not only was he not panicking, but he was actually stretching his neck from side to side, as if he were about to get in a bit of light exercise.

“Yeah, I hit him,” he said. “I toldja I was giving you six shots, didn’t I? What’s the matter—didn’t hear me?”

“Ha! You got some nerve!” one of the upperclassmen laughed.

“Little first-year putting on his big-boy pants, standing up to his elders. You got any idea what’s gonna happen to you now?!” another taunted.

“That’s my line,” Deuce spat with a grin, his voice wild. “I’m gonna avenge those chickies! Come at me!”

“Forget the chickies already! You’re going down!”

Yuya closed his eyes, bracing for the battle.

“Stop it,” a new, lower voice said, and the world around him fell silent.

When Yuya tentatively opened his eyes, a tall boy was standing there. He had an unusual air that commanded attention. Even through the fabric of his school uniform, his extremely toned muscles were obvious, and the scar over his left eye lent an intensity to his well-formed features.

The upperclassmen froze, fists hanging in midair in front of their target as their bravado vanished in a flash, and they shrank into themselves like small animals under the icy gaze of a predator.

“Leona,” one of them half-said, half-whispered.

Deuce stared at the newcomer suspiciously, but Leona paid him no mind as he frowned down at the boys. “Y’all stupid? Year’s only just started, and you’re out here picking fights?”

“But he started it,” one of the upperclassmen protested weakly.

“And?” Leona leveled a glare at him. “You disrespectin’ me?”

“Of course not! We didn’t mean—”

Leona wasn’t wearing a tie or even his uniform jacket, but he was wearing a vest of the same yellow color as the three boys itching for a fight with Deuce. Faced with someone from the same dorm, the boys became quite docile.

Yuya marveled at how easily controlled they were now, compared to just moments before, when they had been so angry. Who was this Leona anyway? Yuya suddenly noticed the small animal ears atop Leona’s long hair and remembered that he had been one of the people leading students at the orientation.

Their eyes met.

“Hey. You,” Leona said, staring at him.

“Y-yes?” Yuya replied and then quickly let out a scream. “Eee!”

Leona had moved close to Yuya and brought his prominent nose up against Yuya’s neck. Terror washed over Yuya at his throat being so helplessly exposed to the other boy. Breaking out in a cold sweat, he was filled with the fear that his throat might be ripped open in the next instant.

“Yu!” Deuce raced over to him, but before his fist could land, Leona stepped away.

“Ha ha!” Leona laughed. “It’s true. You don’t smell of magic at all. So that whole thing at orientation was no joke.”

“Smell? Is he the one—” one of the upperclassmen said as the boys now goggled at Yuya, like they’d only just realized who he really was.

“Yup. This here’s the new kid who can’t use magic—the one the headmage took pity on and made a student here. And y’all know what folks’ll say if you lay a hand on him.” Leona glanced at Yuya and then at Deuce, a smirk crossing his lips. “If you want to toy with these little mice, best do it somewhere out of the way.”

“Hey, hang on.” Deuce glared at Leona and pointed at the boy who’d stepped on the eggs. “I don’t know who you are, but these jerks still haven’t apologized to the chicks. I’m gonna make them pay.”

When Deuce raised his fists, a skinny boy about the same height as him suddenly appeared and rushed to his side, wrapping an arm around Deuce’s shoulders. His animal ears were bigger than Leona’s, and he smiled broadly, with large, droopy eyes.

“Yes, yes,” the new boy said placatingly, patting Deuce’s shoulder. “Let’s have you calm down, too, okay?”

“Who’re you?” Deuce demanded.

“My name is Ruggie Bucchi.” He shuddered, deliberately. “And this scary gentleman is Savanaclaw’s housewarden, Leona Kingscholar. Seeing as you’re picking fights with upperclassmen, it’s clear I’m looking at an idiot here, but trust me. You don’t stand a chance against our housewarden, okay? Times like this, you wanna watch out for number one and walk away.”

“Walk away?” Deuce stared at him incredulously. “*They* picked a fight with *us*. No way I’m gonna run now!”

“Goodness!” Ruggie grinned. “This little kitten has some real spunk to him, hm? You should be thanking me. I called Leona out here personally, ’cause I thought you might be in trouble, y’know?”

“You never do anything without expectin’ something.” Leona said with a tsk at Ruggie. “Even though all you did was fob this mess off on me.”

“Shyeehee!” Ruggie giggled strangely. “That’s our housewarden for you! I can always count on you to stop any fights in no time flat.”

The three boys who'd gotten tangled up with Yuya and Deuce guffawed and sneered. Perhaps Leona's warning had cooled their tempers. He seemed to be pretty popular, as his housewarden title implied.

When Leona turned his back to them, the long tail poking out of his pants swung lazily. With its bushy tip, this tail was not that of a dog or a cat, but rather that of a lion.

Leona let lazy eyes slide over Yuya, and his narrow pupils shivered. Instinctively, Yuya understood that it would be pointlessly, heedlessly reckless to challenge this guy to a one-on-one fight.

"All fine an' good to be so fired up," Leona said in a slow drawl. "But at least have the brains to pick your battles."

"Ha ha ha! You tell 'em, Housewarden!" one of the upperclassman crowed.

"That goes for you dodos, too." Leona sighed and vanished, his dormmates in tow.

Alone now, Yuya looked at Deuce, who silently lowered his head.

"Um, Deuce?" he said, but got no response. Yuya was a little hesitant to approach him after seeing Deuce's shocking transformation. He struggled to understand what had even happened until he heard a small voice.

"I did it," Deuce murmured.

"Huh?"

Deuce yanked his head up, a tragic look on his face. "I forgot myself. I raised my hand to upperclassmen! Sorry, Yu!" He bowed his head, seeming to have gone back to his usual serious self, almost as if Yuya had imagined the demon of moments before. "I must have scared you."

"Oh! No, you saved me, and, uh, don't worry about it." Yuya tried grinning at him, but Deuce already knew how unaccustomed to fighting Yuya was, and it was clear he thought he'd pushed Yuya too far.

"I actually ..." He stopped and sighed like he was in pain. "That's actually the real me." He began to speak slowly, awkwardly. "I had some slipups at the Enchanted Mine, too, so maybe you already noticed, but ... When I was in middle school, I was pretty wild—what you'd call a delinquent."

"A d-delinquent?" Yuya parroted unconsciously, shocked by the admission.

Deuce nodded, with a serious look on his face, confirming what Yuya thought he'd heard. "I cut school all the time and got into fights. I hung out with a bad crowd. We used to have blastcycle races, tearing through mountain passes."

From the way he spoke, Yuya figured a blastcycle was probably something like a motorcycle.

"I dyed my hair, too. Blond. I was a totally different person." Deuce laughed self-deprecatingly. One after another, he listed off the traits of a stereotypical delinquent, admitting to them as his own. These traits were the complete opposite of Yuya's own behavior, but he could easily imagine them.

And then Deuce lowered his voice, his expression more anguished than ever, as if this were the hardest thing for him to admit.

"And ... I'd put down guys who couldn't use magic. Pushed myself up by making a big show of my magic, bragged about how I was different from them. I mean, I was a garbage kind of guy."

If they had met back then, Yuya would no doubt have been Deuce's target. But seeing Deuce struggling now before him, Yuya could tell he really regretted his past.

Yuya wondered if the harsh eyes of the students in the cafeteria hadn't bothered the once-wild Deuce simply because he had been used to having people stare and whisper rumors about him. "But you're totally different now," Yuya said, almost as a prompt. "You're sorry about all that, right?"

"Truth is, I didn't come to that realization on my own." Deuce averted his eyes awkwardly. "I mean, um. This is kind of pathetic, but ..." After falling silent for a moment, he sighed deeply, like he'd resigned himself to his fate.

"I guess there's no point in trying to hide it now." He took another deep breath. "One day, I went home for the first time in a while, and I accidentally saw my mother crying while talking to my grandma on the phone. She was saying I was so wild, and that, like, maybe she had raised me wrong. She kept blaming herself."

Yuya could see that Deuce's fist was trembling inside its black glove. He could almost sense how tightly it was clenched.

"It totally wasn't her fault. She didn't do anything wrong. It was all me! That's when I realized how big of an idiot I'd been. I felt like I had to

make it up to her, to do better. I tried to make amends for the way I'd acted, all the stuff I'd done, but once you're slapped with the 'delinquent' label, there's not much you can do, y'know? Reap what you sow and all that," Deuce readily admitted. Yuya could feel how much he Deuce regretted his past behavior.

"When I got accepted to the famed Night Raven College, I figured it was my chance to start over. Mom was super happy when she saw the carriage come for me. Like it had come for her personally. I decided right then and there that I wouldn't do anything else to make her cry. This time for sure, I'm not going to mess up. I'm going to be an honor student—someone she can be proud of."

"So that's what you ..." Yuya nodded to himself. No wonder Deuce had seemed weird from time to time. Yuya hadn't known how to broach the subject, but Deuce had been aware of it himself.

"But still, when I come up against something I can't handle, like just now, I lose control ... Aah, curses!" He couldn't seem to get over his own shock at having punched an upperclassman. He stared at his own fists as he muttered, "If the Savanaclaw housewarden hadn't come along, that would have turned into a real brawl. It turns out I haven't changed one bit from how hopeless I was back then."

Seeing Deuce limply hang his head, Yuya thought back to when he had found him in the cafeteria on the first day of school. Or the time he'd spoken to him in the classroom. And when he'd come looking for him on the second day. All of his actions, happy as they'd made Yuya, had maybe not come from kindness, but out of his desire to become an honor student.

But that didn't matter. The fact was, Deuce had helped him out a number of times, and Yuya felt like he could count on him. Yuya hadn't said what he should have when Ace had apologized to him, and he regretted that now. If he kept on going this way, never speaking the truth because of his fear, nothing would ever change.

"I'm grateful to you," Yuya said. He took a deep breath. "If I'd been by myself there, they probably wouldn't have let it go even if I had apologized. Who knows what would have happened? Maybe gritting your teeth and putting up with stuff isn't what being an honor student's about. I think that speaking up and saying something's bad when it's bad the way you just did is what an honor student would do." He was nervous speaking

his opinion, and his heart leaped around in his chest as he watched Deuce's face carefully, worried that he was coming off like a weirdo. Nevertheless, he had managed to say everything he wanted to.

"Fighting's not good," Yuya continued, "but that's exactly why I could never stop a fight like that. I think you're amazing."

"Amazing?" Deuce repeated, like he'd been caught off guard.

"Yeah." He nodded. "I'm glad you're in the same class as me."

"You are? That's the first time anyone's ever said anything like that to me." Deuce blinked rapidly for a moment or two, but then eventually smiled with embarrassment. "I should thank you, too. It's too bad I couldn't pay those guys back for the chicks' sake at least, but I'm sure they'll rest in peace." He looked extremely solemn.

Yuya was certain of something now; he'd thought there was no way it could actually be true, but it seemed that it was. "Um. Sorry," he said, hesitantly. "Can I say just one more thing?"

"S-sure." Deuce straightened up with a gasp. "Of course! You have to tell me if anything's bothering you, or if there's something I need to work on to become an honor student."

"Oh, it's not anything like that." This was extremely hard for Yuya to say, but now that he and Deuce had grown a little closer, he felt like he could muster up the courage to spit it out. "Those eggs were unfertilized. They were never going to be chicks."

Deuce looked more surprised by this than anything else thus far. "Are you kidding me?!"



THE AIR SMELLED SWEET with the aroma of melting butter and sugar as the moist, creamy tart baked in the oven.

Hands wrapped in oven mitts, Trey very carefully pulled the confection out and nodded, seemingly satisfied as he looked it over. “Great. It came out perfect. Once it cools a little, we’ll pile on the chestnut cream and decorate it with icing sugar and marrons glacés. Only a little more until it’s finished.”

“Whaaat? We’ve still got more stuff to do? I’m wiped already.” Ace sighed as he slumped over onto the counter. “My fingers are still stinging from peeling the chestnuts.”

“That strainer thing was no picnic, either!” Grim moaned. “Crushing and crushing and crushing chestnuts, for the rest of time.”

“Well, I never imagined the two of you would collect so many of them,” Trey said.

When Yuya and Deuce had arrived at the kitchen after a quick stop at the store to pick up more eggs, they had been greeted by an enormous bowl of chestnuts. The shells and skins had already been removed, leaving a mountain of the pale-yellow nuts. Yuya was surprised Ace and Grim had split up and collected a whole basket of them.

“You really went out there and did it, huh?” he said admiringly.

“Right? Right?!” Grim leaned toward him eagerly. “And I found way more than that useless sack of skin Ace!”

“Whatever.” Ace rolled his eyes. “You bawled like a little baby when the chestnut thorns stabbed into your widdle toe beans.”

Yuya was somewhat worried that this would turn into yet another argument, but despite the harsh words coming out of their mouths, they actually seemed to be getting along pretty well. Maybe the competition fueled them. He considered the idea that they might have the potential to end up surprisingly good friends.

“Aaaah.” Ace pursed his lips together unhappily. “If I’d known it was gonna be so hard, I would’ve gone shopping with Yu instead of sticking with Grim. That’d definitely have been more fun instead of getting stuck with all this grunt work.”

“I don’t know about that.” Trey frowned as he dried his hands after washing all the dishes with an efficient, experienced air. “They almost got into it with guys from Savanaclaw, you know? That was a real close call. A lot of the guys in that dorm are gym-rat types, so they totally would’ve had the upper hand in a fight. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Gym rats?” Yuya frowned. Since they all had magic, how could Trey say that Savanaclaw would always have the upper hand, even if the other side was physically weaker? He was about to ask when Trey started laughing.

“Ha ha ha! Right, you wouldn’t know. Personal fights using magic are prohibited on campus. And it makes sense if you think about it. If you had a bunch of kids going around attacking every guy who gave them side-eye, the school would be burned to the ground in two seconds flat, y’know?”

A vision of the fight between Ace and Grim in front of the Great Seven statues popped up in Yuya’s head. Ace quietly averted his eyes.

“So the housewarden of Savanaclaw really did save us,” Yuya said.

“Mmm.” Trey frowned. “This is Leona we’re talking about here. He probably wanted to avoid headaches is all. If guys from his dorm gang up on first-years, people are going to start pointing fingers at him, since he’s housewarden. Well, in any case, I’ll say thanks the next time I see him. Just be careful from now on.”

Deuce nodded listlessly behind him.

“What’s with you anyway?” Ace demanded. “You’re being super quiet. You seem weird.”

“This Leona guy freaked you out, that it?” Grim guessed, shaking his head disapprovingly. “Pretty pathetic, my dude.”

Yuya hadn’t told them about Deuce’s past or the eggs, so he just mumbled something vague. While they were talking, the tart had cooled down.

“Would you get the sieve out?” Trey pointed to the cabinet behind Yuya. “The cap should be in that drawer there. It’s got a little hole for chestnut cream.”

Yuya dug around in the drawer until he found the small silver tool.

Ace groaned. “You really are supergood at this whole baking thing, huh, Trey? This whole time, you’ve been moving around in here like a pro. You know exactly where everything is in the cafeteria kitchen. It’s like you’ve done this a million times before.”

“Oh, I’m no pro,” Trey protested. “I’ve still got a long way to go. This is actually the first time I’ve made a chestnut tart.”

“What? For real?” Ace stared in surprise. “You’re totally nailing it, though.”

“Riddle likes strawberry tarts,” Trey explained. “So I make those a lot. And most of the recipe’s basically the same.”

Ace scowled at the mention of Riddle’s name, and Trey gave him a pained smile.

“This chestnut tart we’re making is something Riddle’s wanted for a while now. And after I found this recipe book in the library, I wanted to give it a go.” He glanced at the book on the counter. “But getting the chestnuts prepped is way too much work by myself. This tart’s a special treat. I’m sure Riddle will be thrilled.”

“I don’t care if he likes it or not, so long as it works as an apology,” Ace said grumpily.

“Yeah! And I’m pumped to have a piece!” Grim declared.

Despite Ace’s and Grim’s words, it was clear the tart was more than just edible. Pressed through the sieve, chestnut cream curled atop the tart, creating fluffy threads of deliciousness. Finally, they sprinkled icing sugar over it and gently placed the marrons glacés.

“Okay. Done!” Trey said, pleased.

“Mmm. Something smells greaaat.” Cater waltzed into the kitchen the moment the tart was declared complete. Perhaps he’d been watching things

play out from some hidden corner. “Ooh, those look so cute! They really shiiine! ♪ Let me snap a quick pic for Magicam!”

Ace blocked his way with a sour look. “What, *now* you decide to show up?”

“I just came to see how hard my little newbs were working.” He grinned. “See if you’re fighting the good fight in here. And someone’s gotta be the official taster, right?”

“Whoa. Taster!” Grim’s eyes lit up. “Gimme, gimme, gimme!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Trey sliced up the small extra tart they’d baked. When the knife touched it, the slightly warm tart crust broke gently apart. When he handed Yuya a plate, Yuya couldn’t help but start drooling. The group picked up their forks as one and shoveled the delightfully warm tart into their mouths.

“Mm. Mmmm! Rich in flavor, yet not too sweet!” Grim pressed his cheeks and jumped up into the air. “It’s like chestnuts are dancing across my tongue!”

“Is that a good thing?” Trey smiled crookedly.

“It’s really delicious!” Yuya cried out. The simple sweetness of chestnuts filled his mouth, mixing in a heavenly way with the buttery crust. He felt like he could eat this forever. “I’ve never had a tart this good. You’re amazing, Trey.”

“That’s a bit much,” Trey demurred, though he continued to smile happily. “But thank you.”

Even gloomy Deuce’s eyes lit up. “It’s like something they’d sell in a store!”

“Right?” Cater said with a knowing grin. “I told you he was scary good.”

“Why are you acting all smug?” Deuce demanded. “Clover did all the work.”

“But I struggled, too!” Cater protested. “Sir Trey here looks all nice and kind, but he’s a real grump, mkay? Like, he went and said to me with the straightest of faces, ‘The secret ingredient in a tart is Walrus-brand young-oyster sauce.’ I mean, I almost believed him and made a mess of the whole thing.”

“That’s ...” Deuce began before he trailed off. He was about to make a joke asking how anyone could believe something like that, but then he remembered his own misconception about the eggs.

“I can’t believe you believed me!” Trey said as he smiled brightly. Ace and Grim glanced at him, but Trey didn’t seem malicious. “It was a joke. Never thought you’d fall for it. I mean, who puts oyster sauce in a pastry?”

“No, no. When you go telling me so perfectly seriously that ‘the umami of the oyster gives the cream a deep, savory flavor,’ of course I’m going to believe it.” Cater winked. “Hey, Trey, speaking of jokes, do that thing.”

“Hm?” Trey looked puzzled for a second and then nodded. “Oh, that thing?”

Yuya and the others craned their heads to one side, wondering what they were talking about. Trey’s grin was mischievous and surprising, given how mature he’d seemed up to that point.

“What’s you guys’ favorite food?” he asked.

“Favorite food?” Ace frowned for a second. “I like cherry pie.”

“It’s eggs for me,” Deuce said. “If I had to pick, maybe ... omelet rice, I guess.”

“Canned tuna all the way!” Grim cried. “And second place is cheese omelet, grilled meat, pudding—”

“Yeah, yeah, we get it,” Ace said, cutting Grim off. He looked at Yuya. “What about you?”

“I ...” Yuya was stumped. “Rice, maybe?”

“Rice?” Ace repeated.

If Yuya said that he liked how it could go with anything, Deuce and Ace would roll their eyes at him, so he kept his mouth shut.

Cater laughed and then said, “I like a nice lamb chop with diablo sauce.”

“All right. You’ve got it.” Trey pulled out his magical pen, which he began waving slightly. He said in a low voice, as if talking to himself, “White to red, red to white. *Paint the Roses.*”

Yuya and the others exclaimed in surprise as they watched glittering particles of light dance through the air.

Trey pointed at their plates. “Go ahead, have another bite of the tart.”

They picked up their forks and did as he suggested.

At first, Yuya thought his tongue was broken. There was none of the rich chestnut flavor from a moment earlier. Cocking his head to one side as he chewed, perplexed, he started to gradually taste a sweetness. The more he chewed, the more he felt a twinge in his memory at the fragrance of a grain that spread throughout his mouth.

“Huh?” Ace also had a puzzled look on his face. “It’s a chestnut tart, but it tastes like cherry pie!”

“Is this ... ketchup?!” Deuce exclaimed. “It tastes like eggs and ketchup. It’s omelet rice!”

“Myah!” Grim cried in delight. “Canned tuna and cheese omelet and grilled chicken and pudding! All the flavors are wrestling for the top spot!”

Apparently, everyone was tasting whatever they had said was their favorite, and there was no mistaking the familiar flavor of rice filling Yuya’s mouth.

Trey and Cater burst out laughing.

“Neat trick, eh?” Cater said. “I never get tired of asking for it. Always delicious and a total blast. Ten out of ten, no notes. This is a surefire hit to liven up any dinner party! ♪”

“It’s my signature spell,” Trey said, seeming amused that his prank was a success. “It’s called Paint the Roses. It can overwrite characteristics like taste, color, smell, and things like that.”

“That’s serious magic.” Deuce’s eyes shone. “No wonder you’re vice housewarden.”

“So you’re saying, with that spell, I could eat the grass outside, and it’d taste like tuna?!” Gluttonous Grim looked extremely jealous. “That’s the best! Way better than that grump Riddle’s magic!”

“As if.” Trey smiled, pained. “Compared with the housewarden’s magic, my spell is child’s play. And it only lasts for a short time, too. It’s like it covers things up for a second, hence the ‘paint.’ Riddle’s way more amazing.” He looked up at the clock. It was already almost midnight. A great deal of time had passed while they’d been absorbed in the creation of their chestnut tarts.

“It’s late,” he said. “Let’s call it a day and give the tart to the housewarden tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s the unbirthday party and all!” Cater sang. “Make sure you’re all on time, kids! ♪”

The other students turned to stare at Ace, and he crossed his arms deliberately. “Yu, can I crash with you again?” he said. “My mean dormmates won’t let me back inside my dorm tonight.”

“That’s fine with me.” Yuya nodded.

“You crash with us again, you gotta pay for the privilege!” Grim said, with a frown. “A whole can of tuna.”

“C’mon, Ace,” Deuce said. “Quit mooching off Yu. You did this to yourself. You made your bed, so lie in it.”

“Where’d that come from, man?” Ace frowned unhappily before his expression flipped into a smile. “Oh, I get it! You’re jealous of me staying at Ramshackle Dorm, eh?”

“What?” Deuce gaped at him. “No!”

“Woh-kay! Yu, let’s get wild *again* tonight!” Ace said gleefully. “There won’t be any busybodies around to tell us to quit, after all.”

“Wild?” Deuce was furious. “You were *just* told tomorrow’s the big unbirthday party.”

“I-I’m okay with anything,” Yuya said weakly. “Don’t you two start fighting again.”

Despite the late hour, Deuce and Ace were full of spit and vinegar. The two third-years shrugged in exasperation. “Fine, okay,” Trey said. “Why don’t you stay at Yu’s dorm, too, Deuce, so you can keep an eye on Ace?”

“Huh?” Ace pouted.

Beside him, Deuce glanced at Yuya warily. “But ...”

“It’s totally fine by me,” Yuya responded, and Deuce’s face brightened. Maybe he really did want to sleep over at Ramshackle Dorm. The thought made Yuya uncomfortable for some reason.

“Are you sure it’s all right, Clover?” Deuce asked.

“Mm-hmm.” Trey nodded. “I can’t have Ace going too hard tonight and oversleeping tomorrow. As vice housewarden, I can issue you a sleepover pass.”

“Luckyyyyy!” Cater looked at Deuce, who seemed pleased with this turn of events, then poked Trey in the arm. “You’re always spoiling the newbs, Trey. Maybe I’ll have a sleepover at Yu’s, toooo.”

“No pass for you,” Trey said immediately.

The students quickly finished cleaning the kitchen and put the chestnut tart away in the fridge.

“All right, then. Don’t stay up all night,” Trey cautioned.

“Nighty night, boys! ♪” Cater said with a wave.

“Good night!” the first-years chorused as they watched Trey and Cater leave before turning off the lights in the kitchen. When they stepped

outside the building, the moon was as bright as ever.

“I guess if you guys’re so desperate to come over, I could maybe invite you into my manor,” Grim told them and started walking up ahead happily. “Be grateful!”

Yuya trailed behind with Ace and Deuce, discussing the events of the day.

Deuce grimaced at the scent of the musty air in the lounge of Ramshackle Dorm. “It’s as old inside as it looks outside.”

“It’s got po-ten-shal!” Grim sniffed, indignant.

With Deuce’s arrival, it was clear the sofa was no longer going to work as a bed, and the lounge was too small for them to all sleep on the floor. The group’s only option was to move to an area that had already been tidied, so they picked up the clean cushions and carried them to Yuya’s bedroom.

Yuya had chosen a room so large it was almost too big for one person. The mirror above the fireplace was its most notable feature, and perhaps because the mirror reflected the light, this room seemed brighter than the others, which was why Yuya liked it. Fortunately, the mirror had not been damaged by the rain leaking through the roof, and it was neither rusted nor cracked. When he had first come across it, the glass had been clouded over, but a little polishing had easily restored its brilliant gleam.

Ace looked around curiously as he stepped inside. Since he’d slept in the lounge the previous night, this was the first time he was seeing Yuya’s room. “Huh. This isn’t quite ... a place where a person could live yet,” he commented.

“Hey!” Deuce shot a glare at him. “Don’t insult Yu.”

“*You* were the one talking about how old this place was five seconds after we walked through the door!” Ace shot back.

Pretending he couldn’t hear them, Yuya spread out the cushions and blankets on the floor. The ghosts flew about, singing, and flapped a large sheet onto the makeshift bed next to Yuya’s actual bed. It was simple, but it would do as a place to sleep for a single night.

Yuya climbed onto his bed and looked down at the other two boys. “The room’s old, but it’s clean, and it’s pretty big. Sorry it’s not an actual bed,

but I hope you can put up with it for tonight. And feel free to shower or whatever now or in the morning, if you want. You need anything else?”

“Oh! Could I have one more pillow? This thing gets in the way of me sleeping.” Sitting cross-legged, Ace lifted his jaw to show him the collar around his neck. It did look like it would get in the way of lying down comfortably.

“Right. I forgot.” He apologized to the sulking Ace and handed him a pillow. “I’m so used to seeing it on you.”

“*Merci!* I might be able to get to sleep somehow now.” Even as he spoke, Ace was arranging the pillow under his head and looking quite comfortable. As Yuya watched Ace, he realized that the collar not only prevented Ace from using magic, but also got in the way of him just living his life. Yuya was starting to understand how serious Riddle’s signature spell really was.

“I had a tough time sleeping last night, too,” Ace said. “I mean, I had to find a spot to sleep and then get myself all tucked into it. Lotta work. Maybe I’ll go buy a sleeping bag and some pillows and stuff for next time.”

“Next time?” Deuce furrowed his brow. He had built a wall of cushions between himself and Ace. “How long are you planning to impose on Yu like this, Ace? You’re not actually going to weasel out of apologizing to Housewarden Rosehearts, are you?”

“As if!” Ace snorted. “Not after killing myself to make that tart. It’s just, like, even after we go back tomorrow, I could sorta come over here whenever I get fed up with Heartslabyul, y’know? Looks like they’ve got rooms to spare. It’d be okay for me to bring over a few things, right?”

“It would not!” Grim shouted in Yuya’s ear, just as Yuya was about to say it was fine. “All them rooms’re mine!” Despite the fact that he had been the one to insist they pick out rooms for themselves, he’d been lounging in Yuya’s room for the last few days. He said it was only until they got the other rooms cleaned up, but he hadn’t so much as touched a broom. Yuya figured he was probably nervous about being all by himself in Ramshackle Dorm.

“And how exactly are you gonna use *all* the rooms in Ramshackle Dorm?” Ace demanded.

“New room every day,” Grim replied archly. “Constant rotation. So there’s no extra for you, Ace.” Was it just in his nature to want to make everything his?

“How decadent,” Deuce noted with exasperation before his tone turned serious. “Ramshackle Dorm might be surprisingly great, though. I could live however I wanted to. No classmate to get all up in my business like a certain *someone*, no upperclassmen picking fights.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Ace said suddenly. “What was the housewarden of Savanaclaw like, Deuce?”

“What was he like? Umm.” Deuce hesitated, and Yuya could see the awkward discomfort on his face. He was undoubtedly thinking about how he’d lost his cool and challenged the housewarden, but Leona had not given him the time of day. He knew Ace would laugh and ask if he had been in his right mind if he told him about the whole incident, but Deuce was bad at hiding things. It would have probably been only a matter of time before Ace found out about his delinquent past.

“Some people have animal ears and tails, right?” Yuya interjected, throwing a lifeline out to Deuce. “The Savanaclaw housewarden was like that.” He’d seen plenty of students on campus besides Leona and Ruggie who didn’t look entirely human, but no one seemed to give them a second thought, so Yuya had kept his questions to himself.

“Ears?” Ace raised his eyebrows, and then nodded in understanding. “Oh, you mean the beast people?”

“Beets people?” Yuya was sure that had to be wrong.

Ace stretched his arm out toward the bed and wrote “beast people” on the sheets. “You don’t have ’em in your world, Yu?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Only humans go to school and talk and stuff.”

“Humans.” Ace frowned. “So then do you have merfolk?”

“Merfolk?!” Yuya gaped at him. “You mean, outside of stories?”

“Stories!” Ace laughed. “Your world really is weird, Yu. Here, we call everybody human—merfolk, beast people, and people like us, too.”

“You do?” He looked at Grim by his side.

The monster turned his nose up at him. “I don’t give a hoot about anyone but the magnificent Grim,” he told him, curtly.

“Beast people inherit the animal features of their ancestors, so a lot of ’em are super good at, like, sports and physical stuff,” Ace explained. “So you tend to see a lot of ’em in Savanaclaw, with the nature lovers and gym rats. Still, we’ve got some in our dorm, too.”

“You do?” Yuya paused to digest this. “His name was Leona Kingscholar, right, Deuce? He seemed like a powerful guy.”

“Yeah.” Deuce nodded. “He’s got such an overwhelming presence. Maybe he’s a lion person? I’ve never seen one before, either. The King of Beasts is one of the Great Seven and all. I heard the Sunset Savanna’s ruled by lion beast people in his honor. Housewarden Kingscholar also got those dorm students in line pretty quick. Like a real leader.”

That was exactly it. Leona was obviously very strong, so as with Riddle, there was a clear line drawn between himself and other students. It was only natural that Ruggie and Yuya would both stop in their tracks when they came face-to-face with someone like that, who almost dared them to run away. But at the time, Deuce’s focus had been on something else entirely.

Deuce cleared his throat. “But, Ace, why are you asking about him out of the blue?”

“Oh, I dunno.” Ace shrugged. “It’s just that our housewarden is so supremely annoying. I was wondering if there was anyone around who could stop him.”

“Are you trying to overturn the natural order of upperclassmen and lowerclassmen?! To overthrow our housewarden?!” Deuce shouted, and then Yuya heard a dull *whump*. Ace had thrown a cushion at Deuce.

“Shut your piehole!” he growled. “Also, this has been bugging me forever. You keep going on about upperclassmen and order and respect. What is with all your hierarchy stuff?”

“Huh? I’m not ... I mean, it’s normal. Right, Yu?” Deuce glanced over at Yuya.

“Something’s fishy with you guys.” Ace eyed them suspiciously, but when Yuya nodded at him to continue, he returned to the subject at hand. “Right, housewardens. All of ’em are seriously amazing, okay? My older brother graduated from Night Raven College, and he was always going on about how the power of the housewardens was next level.”

Deuce and Yuya both remarked that they didn’t have any older brothers, and Ace grinned. “Yeah, you don’t seem like you do. Anyway! According to my brother, all the guys with real power and anyone with ambition are gunning for the housewarden title. I guess that makes sense when you think about it. Being housewarden at a prestigious school’s something you can

brag about for the rest of your life. Plus, your future's basically guaranteed. I mean, if you can get the position, why not, you know?"

"If you can?" Deuce rolled his eyes. "You make it sound so simple. But Housewarden Rosehearts is only a second-year, right?"

"True." Yuya frowned. "I heard that the fourth-years aren't on campus because they're doing fieldwork. But the third-years are still here, right? I would've thought the most senior students would get the leadership positions."

"Whoa, whoa." Ace looked back and forth between Deuce and Yuya incredulously. "Are you two serious here? This is Night Raven College. Power rules above all else in this place. A second-year can totally be housewarden if he can prove to everyone that he's stronger than they are. My brother said it happened all the time when he was here."

"If he can prove he's stronger ..." Yuya sighed. Was it possible that Night Raven College was nothing more than a den of fighting? At his old school, there'd been elections for student council positions. Maybe there was a similar way to become housewarden.

"Housewarden Rosehearts took the top spot as a second-year. He must really be incredible," Deuce said, his voice charged with emotion.

"Trey and Cater were both freaked out by him, even though they're older." Ace snorted. "I figured pitting housewarden against housewarden might be able to take him down a peg, though. But it sounds like the housewarden of Savanaclaw is a no-go there. I'd be too scared to start up that conversation with a powerful lion dude. I wish someone would make Riddle squeal already."

"You seriously haven't learned anything at all." Deuce shook his head.

"The way you're all going on about how amazing these housewardens are, you're making me wanna step up and take the job, too." Grim waved his paws around.

Deuce laughed. "There's only the two of you in Ramshackle Dorm, so that makes things easy. Although you'd still have to get the headmage's approval, so there's that."

"Listen," Ace interjected. "If anyone's gonna be housewarden, it's Yu, yeah? I mean, a monster housewarden—that'd be a first."

"What?" Grim's ears twitched against Yuya's head. "Woh-kay, Yu. You an' me are dukin' it out for the housewarden throne!"

"I'm good." Yuya smiled. "I'll let you have it, Grim."

"Yeah, maybe you don't have that housewarden vibe, Yu." Deuce looked him over. "And you're not really a vice housewarden, either. Oh! How about being a prefect?"

Yuya frowned at the unfamiliar word.

"Ooh, nice! Yes!" Ace cried, laughing. "A dorm's got all kinds of jobs besides housewarden and vice housewarden. Deuce is right—you're perfect for prefect, Yu. Ramshackle Dorm needs you."

"Ramshackle Dorm needs ..." Yuya paused. "Wait, what does a prefect do?"

"Keeps an eye on the other dorm students to make sure they don't get into it," Ace told him.

A slow grin spread across Yuya's face. "Oh. Then yeah, maybe." He laughed with the other two boys. Grim, however, appeared not to understand why they were cracking up. His tail flicked back and forth curiously.



When Trey and Cater got back to the dorm, students came racing out of the lounge on the verge of tears. There were a dozen or so of them, familiar collars clamped around their necks.

"Vice Housewarden Trey! Cater! We've been looking everywhere for you!" one cried out.

Trey somehow managed to suppress the urge to sigh and say, "Again?" Instead he asked, "What happened here?"

"Do you remember the Queen of Hearts' Rule 256—'No drinking honey-sweetened lemonade after 8 p.m.'?"

"We forgot about it, and in the lounge ... we accidentally ..." The boy gulped. "And then Housewarden Riddle took our heads! He was scary angry!"

Trey looked at Cater. It was hard to read his face, as he looked both exasperated and sad. Trey also had no idea what to tell the upset students who were pleading with him.

“I can’t take it anymore!” a student cried.

“He watches us inside the dorm, outside the dorm, everywhere. I need to be free!” another begged.

“Everything we do violates some nonsense rule! He just keeps pushing them on us, and what do they even mean anyway? Plus, he’s getting stricter about them every day!”

“I see his angry face in my dreams. I’m half-traumatized. I want to transfer to a different dorm.”

Whether he liked it or not, Trey couldn’t overlook the red-and-black collars around the necks of the boys before him. They stretched out halfway across the students’ shoulders.

Riddle’s signature spell was terrifying not only because it sealed a person’s magic, but also because the collar ripped away a student’s dignity. These students had been stricken with this humiliating symbol of a mage with no magic, and the next day would undoubtedly be hard for them.

“It’ll be okay. We’ll go talk to the housewarden.” Trey forced a smile and patted the students’ shoulders. “He’s probably just on edge because the unbirthday party’s tomorrow. I’m sure he’ll forgive you if I explain the situation. How about you all go back to your rooms and wait?”

The students looked at each other and nodded begrudgingly. Trey let out an internal sigh of relief. Riddle would have become even angrier, slipping completely out of control and beyond Trey’s reach, if they had left the dorm the way Ace had. He was glad it hadn’t come to that yet.

“Okay.” Cater winked. “I’ll go make some tea as a show of deference to the queen.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Trey gave him a wan smile.

“No, no, happy to do it. I know you’ve got it rough, too, Vice Housewarden.” Cater smiled sunnily, despite the gloomy situation. He was great at self-regulation, and it was especially welcome at times like this. Trey felt his load get a little lighter just from seeing someone else who understood the situation, even if he knew in his heart that it wasn’t exactly true.

“Oh, but no black tea. I’m pretty sure Rule 53 says something about drinking caffeinated tea at night.”

Cater’s eyebrows rose for a split second, but his familiar smile was quick to return. “Roger that. I’m on it. One pot of herbal tea, coming up!”

“Thanks,” Trey said again, and after watching Cater go, he took a deep breath. What time would he get to go to bed tonight? Talking Riddle down after one of his tantrums was exhausting work.



“Another dream ... ?”



QUEEN OF HEARTS: For painting my roses red, someone will
lose his head!

THREE OF CLUBS: Y-Your Majesty, if anyone's to blame, it's him!

TWO OF CLUBS: Have mercy, Your Grace. It was the Ace!

QUEEN OF HEARTS: So it was *you*.

ACE OF CLUBS: Gah, no, it was the Two!

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Then he will pay.

TWO OF CLUBS: It was the Three, I say!

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Enough of this. Off with *all* their heads!

Ooooooh! Yaaaaaay!

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Hee hee hee! ♪

TWO OF DIAMONDS: A fitting end. Color you can't mend.

THREE OF SPADES: Everyone knows the roses should be red.



“HEY, YU!”

The first thing Yuya saw when he opened his eyes was a fluffy, gray tail, bobbing up and down beside him. Grim was happily asleep on his stomach.

“Takes a lot to wake you two up, huh?” Ace said, while Deuce folded up the sheets behind him.

“Morning,” Yuya answered, rubbing his eyes. When had they woken up? The bedding had already been cleared away, and the curtains had been drawn to allow the morning sun to pour in through the window.

“You were dead to the world there. Are you still tired?” Deuce scratched his head. “Maybe we stayed up too late talking yesterday. I just kept going on and on. Sorry.”

“Mm-mm. I was having fun, too.” When Yuya thought about it, this was the first time he’d stayed anywhere with anyone other than his family. Although he’d hardly said anything and mostly just listened to Ace and Deuce, he’d enjoyed himself. He hadn’t wanted it to end, so they’d kept talking a little longer, and then a little longer still, until it had become very late indeed.

“You were supposed to be keeping us in line, Deuce!” Ace woke Grim up and crossed his arms. “Snap to it. Today’s Saturday, and that means it’s time for the unbirthday party. Being the magnanimous soul that I am, I’ll

go and say my sorries to the housewarden. But if he gives me any lip, well, keep a bed open for me.”

“That’s not the attitude of someone who’s apologizing.” Deuce fixed his necktie and stood up straighter. “Should we head over then? The housewarden’ll have our heads if we’re late.”

“Okay. Good luck, guys.” Yuya smiled. “I’ll cross my fingers that he forgives Ace.”

“Huh?” Ace’s eyes grew wide as saucers, and Deuce burst out laughing.

“Huh? What?” Yuya stared at them in bewilderment. “What did I do?”

“You’re talking like you’re not a part of this,” Ace said. “Guilt by association, man. You’re part of the group, Yu! You’re in the car, and it’s already pulled out of the driveway.”

To put it another way, if Ace was going down, he was taking Yuya with him.

“Then—” Yuya started to get up, but Deuce held a hand out to stop him.

“I totally get it, Yu,” Deuce said. “The attitude this guy’s giving you, who’d want to go anywhere with him? If he’s going to drag you into this mess, you’d at least want him to show you a little good faith, right?”

“Oh, I’m actually—”

Deuce smirked, and Ace *tsked* at him.

“Aah, fine, I get it!” Ace shouted. “Quiet already! Please! Come with us, Yu. There. Are you satisfied?”

Yuya really didn’t need this from Ace, but at the same time, it felt kind of good to be invited properly, and he had even started to feel like he might be useful, even if it was just watching from the sidelines. He scooped up Grim, who was still smacking his mouth, half-asleep, and they left Ramshackle Dorm behind them.

When they slipped through the Hall of Mirrors, he saw the same scene as the previous day unfold before him. A luscious green garden, an enormous maze, a beautiful building. Cater was even in the garden painting roses, just as he had been the day before.

“Good morning, Cater!” Yuya called.

“Oh! Yuey and Acey! Deucey! Morning! ♪ Get a good sleep last night?” Cater looked pointedly at the bleary-eyed Grim and laughed. “Of course you didn’t! I mean, a big sleepover party, living it up, living large. Did you

share secrets with each other? Bond over pillow fights and card games? Or maybe you were talking about your *crushes*?”

“Whoa, slow your roll!” Ace said indignantly. “You really just say whatever random thought pops into your head, huh?”

“Ooh, ouch. I mean, ‘random’?” Cater winced theatrically. “And here I was trying to lighten the mood, since I figured you’d be all angst, Acey.”

“Angst?” Ace rolled his eyes. “I’m just giving him a chestnut tart, you know?”

A shadow appeared from the other side of the hedges.

“Huh?!” Yuya stared, unable to believe his eyes.

“Hey, me! Don’t be slacking on the job.” Walking toward them was Cater—the very same Cater they were already talking to at that very moment.

“Bwuh?!” Grim let out a yelp. Perhaps the surprise of it had woken him up at last. “What the heck is that?!”

“There are two of you, Diamond?” Deuce exclaimed, looking back and forth between the two Caters.

“No way. You’re twins, Cater?” Ace’s jaw hung open. “But, like, you look *too* much alike to be twins!”

“Ha ha ha! We’re not brothers,” said the Cater they had met first as he waved his magical pen. “He is me, and I am him. *Split Card*.”

Cater shimmered like a mirage, and his silhouette doubled, then tripled. Yuya squinted to try to get a better look and was stunned at the sight of additional Caters on either side of the Cater holding the magical pen.

“Yikes! We’re in for it. Look at the time!” said the third Cater.

“Didn’t get as much done as I’d hoped yesterday. Unless I hurry, it’s off with my head,” the fourth Cater said.

Standing before four people with the same face, Yuya and his friends were at a loss for words.

“I literally never get tired of seeing peeps’ first reaction to this baby!” Cater tucked away his magical pen. “It’s my signature spell, *Split Card*. Makes magic duplicates of me. I’m the *real* Cay-Cay, though.”

“Copies?” Deuce stared in amazement. “They can talk and touch stuff—they’re basically the same as the real thing! That’s amazing, Diamond!”

“That’s gotta be super handy,” Ace agreed. “I maybe feel a twinge of respect for you for the very first time, Cater.”

“Oof, is that actually a compliment?” Cater flashed them a grin. “Well, thanks either way. It is actually pretty handy. The more duplicates I make, though, the more exhausting it is, so I can’t keep ’em around for too long. But I’m in a real tight spot at the moment, so I’m breaking the whole gang out! ♪”

“Tight spot?” Yuya cocked his head to one side, and the Caters hung their heads.

“Tch! Real me’s lucky. Getting to chat with these cutie first-years!” the second Cater said.

“Well, it’s totally pointless to disobey me. We just gotta accept it,” sighed the third Cater.

“Let’s get this thing done!” the fourth said as the duplicates disappeared into the garden.

“The truth is the roses are still not finished.” The remaining Cater shook his head sadly. “I’ll be in some *pretty* hot water if I don’t get done painting them before the unbirthday party starts, y’know?”

“Whoa, here we go,” Ace said. “Queen of Hearts’ rules nonsense.”

“Oh!” Cater snapped his fingers. “While you’re here, I have a message from Trey. He left your superpowered chestnut tart on a table in the garden, covered by a silver cake dome so you can’t see what it is. He suggested, ‘What if you lifted the lid off right in front of Riddle and made his whole day?’”

“That’s Clover for you.” Deuce smiled appreciatively. “I can’t believe he thought about the presentation, too.”

“Mm, yeah.” Cater grew pensive. “It’ll cause more trouble for us if you kiddies upset Riddle even more, too.”

“Huh?” Deuce’s eyes grew wider.

Cater winked at him, his face breaking into a grin. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

“Oh! You scared me. So that was a joke.”

Cater grinned. “Also, you can’t come to the party looking like that! ♪”

“Oh, come *on*!” Ace threw his arms up into the air. “What now?”

“Myah! The constant nitpicking at this dorm!” Grim howled. “I can’t take no more. I wanna eat party food *now*!”

Ace and Grim stalked toward Cater in frustration. This was a whole lot of fuss just to get into the dorm.

Given that Yuya simply wanted to live an uneventful life, rules were something he should have welcomed. After all, as long as he followed them, there'd be no trouble, and he wouldn't stand out. He'd always thought it was easier to follow a path laid out for him by someone else than to be given total freedom.

He wasn't quite ready to say so out loud yet, but even he was starting to get fed up with the regulations of Heartslabyul Dorm. There were simply too many of them. He wouldn't be surprised if Ace wasn't alone in his unwitting breaking of the rules.

"Now, now. It's nothing huge." Cater held up placating hands. "Yuey, Grimmy, you're our guests. You slay just the way you are. But you and Deucey need to glam it up, Acey. The party's formal. One of the Queen of Hearts' rules."

"I seriously can't even anymore," Ace said, almost laughing.

"I guess it's hard for first-years," Cater said, positioning Ace next to Deuce. "But we're down to the wire here, so I will be your stylist today! Close those pretty peepers, babes! ♪" Ace and Deuce glanced at each other with perplexed looks on their faces, then closed their eyes. Cater muttered something and waved his magical pen.

The magestone flashed, and a glowing rainbow aura enveloped Ace and Deuce. The light was imbued with myriad colors, shimmering around their black trousers and blazers. It shivered, poking at nooks and crannies, until finally it flashed even more dazzlingly, then disappeared.

"Myah! You guys!" Grim cried. "Where'd those duds come from?!"

Ace and Deuce looked each other over before staring at their own bodies in shock.

"Whoa!" Ace exclaimed. "This is some fancy 'fit!"

"What happened to my uniform?" Deuce gaped.

Their outfits had transformed into brilliant costumes with white as their primary color. Their jacket collars featured a different color on either side: red on the right and black on the left, while the lapels had swapped colors—black on the right and red on the left. The lapels curved out before tapering down so that they formed a heart on Ace's and Deuce's chests.

Brooches patterned after card suits and heart-shaped accessories adorned the fronts of their outfits. While most of the decorative elements had a kitschy pop feel, the epaulettes and gold aiguillettes hanging down from their jackets cultivated an air of solemnity. Beneath their jackets, Ace had on a red vest and Deuce a black one to match the color of the suits painted on their faces.

“This is the Heartslabyul Dorm uniform.” At some point, Cater had also changed into the same outfit as Ace and Deuce. With a practiced air, he tightened the yellow-and-black sash around his waist.

“Dorm uniform? Dang it!” Grim frowned and crossed his arms. “Only you guys get to wear cool clothes? No fair!”

“The dorm uniforms are outfits special to each dorm, designed to honor each of the Great Seven. Ours has a little pop of respect for our Queen of Hearts,” Cater said as he gently stroked the brooch pinned to the left side of his chest. It was a white rose, with red dripping down from the top. It looked very much like the roses in this garden that had so recently been painted in accordance with the Queen of Hearts’ rules. “This fashionable treasure can only be worn by Heartslabyul students. It’s supposed to show off our love for our dorm, so we wear ’em at dorm parties and when we’re all hanging out together. We did this even back when the dorm wasn’t quite so strict about the rules.”

Maybe it was because Cater was reminiscing about a time past, but it seemed to Yuya that his words were colored not only by affection, but also by a hint of grief. He struggled with whether to say something, but then Cater lifted his eyes from the brooch, already back to his usual lighthearted self.

“So!” Cater said as he clapped his hands. “Yuey and Grimmy are one thing, but didn’t anyone give you two the lowdown on the uniform?”

“Actually, yeah,” Ace mumbled while scratching his head awkwardly. “The housewarden said some stuff on the first day.”

“I-I’m sorry,” Deuce said as he threw his head down in a deep bow. “I hadn’t seen this uniform at all. I completely forgot about it!”

“Aah, I get that.” Cater gave them a warm smile. “I mean, the dorm uniform’s something we put on to show off. Sashaying around, showing up against other dorms. It’s like saying, ‘We’re Night Raven College! We’re

Heartslabyul Dorm!’ if we’re going off campus. We almost never wear them to class or stuff like that.”

Between the ceremonial robe Yuya had seen at the orientation, Yuya’s current uniform, and now the dorm uniform, it was clear there was a wide variety of clothing at Night Raven College, which seemed about right for a prestigious academy.

“But it’s fierce, right?” Cater did a little spin. “White, red, and gold—I mean, you don’t see too much of that combo in menswear. Plus, all these cutie brooches! ♪ I bet if you two posted pics to Magicam, you’d get a ton of likes.”

“Well ... I guess it kinda works?” Ace said, seeming pleased. “It’s maybe not too bad.”

“I think it’s very cool.” Deuce grinned. “Thank you so much, Diamond!”

Grim whirled around at their feet, gritting his teeth, entirely vexed. “How come only Ace and Deuce get them? I want a dorm uniform, too!”

“A Ramshackle Dorm uniform ...” Personally, Yuya didn’t think it was necessary, as the only thing that popped into his mind was an outfit made of rags strung together, as befitting the dorm’s name.

Grim, however, was throwing a tantrum in response to Ace practically bursting at the seams with pride and boasting about his uniform.

“I want one! I have to have one!” Grim yelled. “Ramshackle Dorm’s gonna make a real fancy, super gorgeous dorm uniform, too! With gold an’ jewels an’ everything! It’s gonna be way cooler than yours. You’re with me, right, Yu?”

“Oh, uh. I’m ...” Yu gave him a wan smile. “The regular uniform’s maybe good enough for me. And, like, Grim, you don’t even wear clothes. You don’t need a dorm uniform.”

“Ex-cuse you! I am too wearing clothes. Check it out. This here’s my best ribbon.”

While they were talking, Cater’s avatars returned, apparently finished painting the roses. Cater made them disappear and turned back to Yuya and the others with an eyebrow arched and asked, “Okay. Ready, kiddos?”

Ace nodded firmly.

“The unbirthday party’s in the garden,” Cater said. “Let’s goooo! ♪”

They followed Cater down the path until they came to a cute heart-shaped wooden door in the hedges. They went through it, and Yu discovered that the space on the other side was much bigger than he had imagined. The lawn was scattered with tables covered in white tablecloths and chairs of varying sizes. The tables were formally set with dishes and cutlery and held a gorgeous assortment of sweets. White cloth. Green hedges. Red roses. Even the sky above was a clear blue like it had been specially ordered for the day. It was a beautiful and somewhat chaotic party venue.

“Myah ha! Yummy!” Grim lunged for a nearby plate of cupcakes, but a second before he could bury his snout in baby-blue-and-pink icing, Cater grabbed him and sat him in a chair.

“Whoa, whoa, Grimmy!” Cater said. “The star of the show’s about to show, so hang on a teensy bit longer.”

A sudden fanfare shook the air, and Yuya, Ace, and Deuce immediately seated themselves.

At the edge of the garden, a rabbit person called out loudly, “All hail our leader! The red sovereign himself ...”

The chatter from different corners of the garden dropped away as everyone held their breaths. Like frightened mice hiding from cats, they shivered in fear and waited for the rabbit person to continue.

“Housewarden Riddle!”

“We salute you, Housewarden Riddle!” The dorm students leaped to their feet. In the gaps between them, Yuya could see an arch of blooming roses.

“Myah! It’s that giant baby!” Grim exclaimed.

“Gah!” Ace gasped, and Yuya slapped a hand over Grim’s mouth.

Riddle appeared beneath the arch in a black cape that was much longer than he was tall. With every measured step forward he took, the cloak caressed the cobblestone path, its rose-red lining catching the eye. The sleeves of his jacket were longer than Ace’s or Deuce’s, and the generous drape hung down to his knees. His sharp gaze was full of a solemn majesty, while his fingers were wrapped in black gloves, and his high heels clacked against the ground. Everything, right down to each individual strand of red hair, radiated pride. The golden crown on his head and his billowing silhouette gave the impression of a queen.

“Hm. The garden roses are red, and the tablecloths are white,” Riddle said as he stood before the dorm students and swept his eyes over the garden.

Trey saw Riddle’s eyes pause on a teapot, and he quietly approached him. “No need for concern. We’ve also prepared jam to spread on the nose of the dormouse in the teapot, should it become necessary.”

“Very good.” Riddle stamped the long scepter in his right hand against the ground. On the end of it, a red jewel flashed, and a cold *clang* echoed through the air. He threw out his left hand to his side, and Trey immediately handed him a glass. Riddle raised the glass and said in a voice that carried throughout the garden, “Well then, on this most significantly un auspicious of days, I bid all in attendance ... a very merry unbirthday!”

“To a very merry unbirthday!” The students lifted their own glasses in the air. At Riddle’s signal, they were finally able to sit down. Here and there, Yuya heard sighs of relief.

But even after the party started, the chatter of voices did not return. No one was talking. No one was moving. No one other than Grim, who was practically climbing onto the table in his eagerness to start feasting. Everyone else was moving cautiously—even just to pick up their forks—and seemed to be extremely on edge, watching and waiting.

Cater smiled crookedly. “You can tell, huh?” he whispered into Yuya’s ear. “The unbirthday party’s been a tradition since the time of the Queen of Hearts, so there are a *lot* of rules. The kids are a teensy bit jumpy that they might accidentally break one of them.”

“Makes sense,” Yuya said as he nodded slowly.

“But the party’s off to a solid start. Not a single hitch.” Cater grinned. “And the start’s the hardest part! Now we just have to do the usual party things, play it old-school cool. ♪ The housewarden’s gotta be breathing a sigh of relief about now.”

Yuya looked over at Riddle filling out the red velvet chair. He was smiling and looking quite smug, perhaps because he was pleased by the seamless start of the event.

“See, Acey!” Cater turned to him, eagerly. “Maybe now’s your chance?”

“Hrngh!” Ace gritted his teeth and stood up. “Not gonna get anywhere by runnin’ away. Time to get this over with!” He picked up the silver cake dome Trey had prepared for him in both hands and walked over to Riddle’s table.

Deuce smiled as he watched him go. He leaned slightly forward and whispered to Yuya and Grim, “Hey, how about we sneak up after him? He did say he wanted us to back him up when push came to shove. Plus, I am *dying* to watch Ace apologize.”

“Myah ha ha! Nice, love it! Let’s go, Yu. We can make fun of Ace later!” Grim said.

Yuya felt kind of bad for Ace, but he let Grim pull him out of his seat. They crept close enough for Yuya to see the nervous expression on Ace’s face as he came to stand beside Riddle.

“Um, Housewarden, sir,” he said. “Is now okay?”

“Ah, it’s you.” Riddle looked him up and down. “The tart thief.”

Trey caught Ace’s eye from his seat next to Riddle’s. “Ace Trappola would like to speak with you,” Trey explained.

“Mm-hmm. I assume that the fact that you’re here means you intend to follow the Queen of Hearts’ Rule 53?” Riddle was surprisingly calm. Maybe Cater was right, and he was finally able to relax now that this important event had begun without incident. The only remaining concern was Ace’s attitude. Yuya watched from the side on tenterhooks, but Ace was surprisingly meek.

“Yes, Housewarden,” he assented obediently. His conduct was perfect for the time and place. It was astonishing and laudable, and it looked like Yuya needn’t have worried. To his other side, Deuce was also nodding his head, satisfied.

“To apologize for eating your tart without permission, sir, I made you a new one in the sincerest good faith.” With a deft smile plastered on his face, Ace lifted the lid of the cake dome. “Voilà! Please accept my deepest apologies.”

“Why, this ... It’s a *chestnut* tart!” Riddle cried out.

After resting for a night, the cream on the tart they had made together looked even more decadent. On top of the golden brown shortbread crust sat a rich, fluffy cream the color of light tea, adorned with large chestnuts,

which added delightful texture. The impeccable tart rested atop a white doily, looking mouthwateringly delicious.

“Yes! Are you surprised? Made with loads of fresh chestnuts, and the tour de force ...” The pride in Ace’s voice slowly trailed off. “Uh? Housewarden?”

Riddle’s face was turning redder by the second, changing into an expression of rage. “I can’t believe this. How *dare* you bring a chestnut tart in here!”

“Huh?” Ace stared at him blankly.

Riddle leaped to his feet with a force that nearly knocked his chair over. “The Queen of Hearts’ Rule 562—‘One must never bring a chestnut tart to an unbirthday tea party’! This is an utterly flagrant violation!”

“The Queen of Hearts’ rules?” Ace groaned. “Again?!”

“Do you understand what you’ve done? You’ve ruined an otherwise perfect unbirthday party. How will you atone for this?!” His merciless condemnation echoed through the garden.

“H-how will I atone?!” Ace cried out, bewildered. “I didn’t know that was a rule!”

The color drained from Yuya’s face, while Trey and Cater whispered to each other.

“Wow, this could be bad. Chestnut tart’s a no-go at an unbirthday party? Trey, did you know that?” Cater asked.

“No, I’ve only memorized up to Rule 350. I never dreamed that even the kinds of cake would be regulated. We really botched this one. Big-time,” Trey whispered back.

“Looks like it,” Cater replied.

The pair raced over and inserted themselves between the housewarden and Ace, as if to protect the latter.

“Housewarden, allow me to apologize,” Trey said, quickly. “We were the ones who suggested making a chestnut tart. As third-years, and as the vice housewarden, this was an act that lacked appropriate consideration.”

“Yes, that.” Cater snapped a finger out at Trey. “I mean, it didn’t even occur to us that there’d be a rule like that, y’know? This isn’t Acey’s fault. And we are, like, super-duper sorry. Okay?”

Riddle glared at them. “You both seem to have misunderstood the situation. The issue is not the *making* of a chestnut tart. The issue is that he

brought it today of all days! To our hallowed unbirthday party! He brings this *thing*. *That* is the transgression! To think you cannot see that!” he snarled, and stared with loathing at the dessert Ace was holding. “Destroy the offending tart immediately.”

A student waiting nearby snatched the tart away.

“Huh?!” Ace grabbed Riddle’s arm. “Hold up ... please. We all worked super hard and gave everything we had to make that tart, you know? You could at least have a bite of it.”

“Quiet!” Riddle spat. “There’s no way I could eat such an odious thing. Not after it has turned this traditional party upside down!”

“Myah, myah.” Grim leaped out in front of him. “I been sitting here listenin’ to you go on about destroyin’ the tart, and how it’s all gross. You’ve got real nerve, buddy. If you want the tart gone, let me eat it!”

“I’m sorry!” Yuya hurriedly slapped a hand over Grim’s big mouth. The monster was remarkably fixated on food, and Yuya had known that, but he’d been careless and let his guard down. Yuya knew that if Grim became the focus of Riddle’s ire, he as his partner wouldn’t make it out unscathed.

Riddle looked slightly surprised at Grim’s appearance, but then he sneered, “What a greedy little cat. Be grateful to the Queen of Hearts that we are nothing if not polite hosts to our guests. Following her example, I shall welcome you both to our tea party. But even for guests, the chestnut tart is forbidden. The moment you take a bite, it will be off with your heads, so go ahead if you dare. Now toss that thing outside of the dorm this very second.”

Grim was muttering some complaint in Yuya’s arms, and Ace slammed a hand down on the table and said, “Like I’m just gonna accept that.” He had apparently completely forgotten the fact that he’d been trying to apologize to Riddle. “All you do is cite one stupid rule after another. You sound totally foolish!”

“Foolish?” Riddle’s face tightened. “You certainly have some nerve talking back to me.”

“Acey, stop!” Cater lunged forward at the pair glaring at each other, Trey by his side. “You can’t be saying that. Let’s just take a deep breath, ’kay?”

“Housewarden, please have mercy on him,” Trey pleaded. “He’s only a first-year—he doesn’t know anything yet. I’ll make sure to have a talk

with him later.”

Riddle brushed away Trey’s attempt at mediation and jabbed the end of his scepter at Ace. “Listen well. In the year since I became housewarden, not a single student from Heartslabyul has dropped out or been held back a year. We are the only house that can boast such a feat. Furthermore, of everyone in this dorm, I have the best academic standing and the greatest strength. Hence, I am the most correct!” He flicked Ace’s collar with the end of his staff, all expression abruptly vanishing from his face. His somehow faraway gaze was so calm that it seemed out of place in this tense situation. “It’s not off with their heads because *I* want to do that. *You* are to blame for breaking the rules. The smallest rule violation will throw wide open the gate to anarchy. All of this is for your own sakes.”

“And who asked you to do that?” Ace snapped.

“No one needed to,” Riddle sniffed. “As housewarden, I have a responsibility and a duty to guide the students of this dorm. You must simply obey me. There’s no talking back allowed. I will not tolerate any response other than, ‘Yes, Housewarden.’”

“Even for a tyrant, this is a bit much! Like, wow, hooray, cool, no one failed. All that means is that the students in this dorm managed to push through *despite* your ridiculous mess of rules. It’s got nothing to do with you and your lunatic obsession!” Ace looked back at the students behind him. “You guys think so, too, yeah? Don’t just stand and stare—say something.”

The students dropped their eyes to the ground and withered into themselves. They jumped at the mere opening of Riddle’s mouth.

“Students!” Riddle called. “Do you think that I’m foolish? That I’m a tyrant?”

“Far from it, Housewarden Riddle, sir!” a student responded.

“We trust in your judgment, sir. Three cheers for the housewarden!” said another.

“What?! You whine about him behind his back, but heaven forbid that in the light of day, you ...” Ace tutted indignantly. “Spineless, fair-weather cowards.”

The students started chanting as if to drown him out.

“Three cheers for the housewarden!” they shouted earnestly, fear tightening their faces. “Three cheers for the housewarden!”

Not a single voice was off the beat in the swirling chant. The command was unnerving.

Trey and Cater fell silent.

“See? There you have it. It appears that you’re the only odd one here.” Riddle was triumphant amid the acclaim.

With enemies on all sides, Ace screwed up his face in frustration.

It was a nightmare. Yuya felt dizzy at the terrible spectacle before his eyes. It was like the dream he’d had the previous night, but much worse. Because it wasn’t some playing card soldier forced into this predicament now; it was Ace.

Ace had helped him out too many times to count, and he wanted to repay that favor. And yet his feet were paralyzed. He was too scared to jump into the fight. Grim beat at Yuya’s arms. Right. He couldn’t stay here like this. But even though he knew that, his throat was dry as a bone, and just swallowing hurt. How was he supposed to produce words in this state? His heart felt like it was being ripped out of his chest at the sight of Ace standing there alone. He wanted to say something to him. Just when Yuya finally managed to open his mouth between ragged breaths, Deuce took a step forward.

“I’m in agreement with Ace’s opinion,” Deuce said. Like when he had faced the upperclassmen from Savanaclaw, he leveled a powerful gaze at Riddle.

“You’re Deuce Spade, yes?” Riddle said, coldly. “Do you intend to disobey *me*, the housewarden? You do understand how serious a crime that is?”

“Mm-hmm. Going against the boss is bad. It’s not the sort of thing an honor student would do. That’s what I’ve thought all this time.” Deuce slapped a fist into the open palm of his other hand. He shouted, as if to shake off all doubt, “But overlooking something wrong is exactly the sort of thing an honor student would *never* do!”

Ace’s jaw dropped, and then he exploded in laughter. “Ha ha ha! Oh, man. You actually say some good stuff sometimes.”

“Quiet,” Deuce snapped. “I’m not saying it for you. Rules are important, but I think this is beyond irrational. Saying that the tart we all made is odious? Punishing you just for *bringing* it? It’s not right!”

“Yeah, exactly.” Ace nodded vigorously. “What’s the serious crime here? How is this for *our* sakes? I take it back. I will not apologize to a selfish little tyrant like you.”

Riddle froze. “What did you just say?” His hushed tone was particularly frightening.

As Yuya shuddered, Grim slipped out of his arms and bared his teeth at Riddle. “He said you’re a big baby of a selfish tyrant who wastes food!”

“Huh?!” Ace gasped.

“I didn’t say all that, though!” Deuce exclaimed.

Yuya looked at Riddle, who was now purple with rage, and reached a hand out, but he was too late. The housewarden swung his scepter down. “*Off with Your Heads!*” he shouted.

A dazzling light flashed, blanketing Yuya’s field of view in white, and Grim shrieked. When his vision finally returned to normal, Yuya saw Grim, Deuce, and Ace blinking in confusion. “Aah,” he sighed. “Deuce, Grim. Your necks ...”

They looked down at themselves. Just like Ace, they were now wearing large collars.

“Whoa!” Deuce grabbed his own with a cry. “Th-this ... The housewarden ... Curses! He got me right while I was watching. Pathetic.”

“Again?!” Grim whined. “I hate this stupid thing! Yu! Grab on.”

“Okay!” Yuya raced over and yanked on Grim’s collar with all his might. But no matter how hard he pulled, it wouldn’t budge. It was the same with Deuce’s and Ace’s shackles. Grim scrabbled at his with his sharp claws, but the solid lock didn’t even get a scratch.

Riddle panted, hands clenched into tight fists. His face was so red Yuya almost expected steam to rise from it.

“Trey, Cater,” he said, shrilly. “Throw these ill-mannered louts out!”

“Yes, Housewarden.” Trey and Cater stepped forward, as if to protect Riddle.

“Huh?” Ace looked back and forth between them. “Hang on. Hey. We’re not done talking here!”

“Hey, uh, Trey? Cater?” Ace entreated.

“Sorry, Acey! Can’t disobey the housewarden, you know? ♪” Cater said.

“But—” Deuce looked shocked. “I misjudged you, Diamond! And you think this is funny, Clover?”



“Don’t think badly of me,” Trey said, his face devoid of expression, and Yuya and his friends floated up into the air. Wrapped in Trey’s and Cater’s magic, they were carried to the garden entrance.

“Hey! Put me down! I said, put! Me! Down!” Ace kicked and flailed, and the tips of his fingers grazed Trey’s hat. The group floated up even higher, and they all struggled against this invisible force. They no doubt looked ridiculous to anyone watching on the ground.

“Ace. Deuce,” Trey said, his voice pitched so only they could hear him. “Chill for a bit at Ramshackle Dorm. Yu, can you keep an eye on them? We’ll talk to the housewarden and make it so they can come back to the dorm if they apologize.”

His words, meant to be comforting, were actually cruel, as they seemed to condemn the first-years, implying they were in the wrong and there was no room for discussion.

“Who’s gonna apologize?!” Ace roared. “I’m not in the wrong here. I will never, ever apologize!”

Leaving only their shouting behind, they were evicted from the party. The door closed in stark refusal of them.

“Rrrgh! I’m so angry!” Ace punched the door.

From the other side, they heard Riddle say, “Hmph. Now, let’s get this party back on track. In order to ensure that the croquet tournament is carried out smoothly, we will proceed at a run.”

“Yes, Housewarden,” came the mandated response.

“That guy’s so full of himself! Little ginger megalomaniac. Who does he think he is, the Queen of Hearts? Right?!” Ace fumed. Then he turned around, and his eyes grew wide.

Deuce stared with empty eyes, all signs of his earlier passion drained away. “I just ... This ugly collar ... I’m no better than Ace now ...” The shock of being collared had hit him hard. His shoulders slumped forward, and Ace pouted at him.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Don’t go all soft on me now, man.”

“Myaaaah. This collar pinches. And it’s heavy,” Grim whined, scratching at his neck unhappily.

Yuya reached his hand out and was about to ask if he was okay, but abruptly stopped. Did he have any right to ask?

"I never thought Housewarden Rosehearts would get so angry," Deuce moaned.

"When you challenged him like that?" Ace arched a skeptical eyebrow. "That tyrant was obviously going to go off."

"I didn't say anything to reject the housewarden himself! I figured he'd get it if we could talk. The problem was Grim saying he was a selfish baby ... I mean, of course he was going to flip out about that!"

"Yeah, you went a little too far, Grim," Ace agreed.

"But it's just, the tart, he was gonna ..." Grim moaned.

Collars hung around the neck of each member of the dejected group, with the exception of Yuya. He hadn't been able to speak up against Riddle the way Deuce and Grim had; he'd simply stayed silent and watched as Ace was punished.

"Hey, Yu! You're the prefect, yeah?" Ace poked his shoulder. "How come you weren't keeping an eye on Grim? You never know what mess he's gonna make. I mean, come on. Hold on to his leash."

Yuya looked up, feeling like he was being criticized for abandoning Ace. Maybe Ace had totally given up hope on him. He felt so guilty, he couldn't look him in the eye.

"Yu?" Ace said. "Something wrong?"

"I. Um," he stammered.

"What." Ace furrowed his brow quizzically. "If you don't tell me, I won't know, man."

Are you mad at me? He was not brave enough to pose the question to Ace's face. Now, belatedly, he understood how Ace had felt when he'd asked Yuya the same thing. It was like they were right back where they started. An anxious vortex of regret took over his heart. He'd been able to stop everyone from fighting at the Enchanted Mine, so why hadn't he been able to stand up for Ace back there? Even though Ace had saved him, and they were finally getting to be friends. He hated his cowardice.

His waffling made Ace cry out at last, "Come on, *what?!?*"

Deuce also appeared troubled, noticing that something was wrong with Yuya. Only Grim paid no mind to the affairs of the humans and continued

to tug on the collar around his neck, grunting, “Myaaannh! If I could just get this collar off, I’d give that little grouch a run for his money!”

“You’re really racking up those collars. Quite the impressive collection!” an unfamiliar voice said suddenly.

Yuya looked over to see a ball floating above Grim’s head. He stared for a second, and then cried out with Deuce and Ace in unison, “Ghost head!”

The ball was in fact a human head with pointed, triangular ears adorned with a variety of gold accessories that protruded from a purple bob with layered highlights. And then the head moved.

“Monsterrrrrr!” Grim cried out, looking up a little belatedly. He hid himself behind Yuya’s legs, using them as a shield.

“Whoopsy! Forgot to get my body out there,” the head said, and grew a neck. Yuya stared in astonishment as it kept going, producing a body from the top down in short order—shoulders, arms, chest. When heavy purple boots materialized at the very end, the head had become a boy.

“W-w-w-w-what even *are* you?!” Grim yelped.

The boy was wearing an oversized white shirt with its collar hanging open over his shoulders, a purple-and-pink top visible underneath. The top was the same color as the striped tail that peeked out from royal blue pants covered in badges. The badges were colorful and cute, and many were arrow themed, with words like *THIS WAY*, *THAT WAY*, and *BACK*.

“The name’s Artemiy Artemiyevich Pinker. Am I a cat? Am I a purrrson? A mome rath with a knack for magic? I am a profound mystery.”

“Ar—what?” Deuce replied, baffled.

“Artemiy Artemiyevich Pinker. People usually just call me Chenya. Let’s just say I’m not from the other side of the looking glass.”

“Chenya ... sir? Or are you a first-year? Which dorm and year are you in?” It was no wonder Deuce was asking, as Chenya wasn’t wearing the colored armband that denoted which dorm a student was in, nor was he wearing a vest or wielding a magical pen.

Grim crept close and sniffed at him, but the boy was carefree and paid him no mind.

“Why don’t you try to guess?” he said with a smile.

“I don’t care about introductions or whatever at the moment, thanks.” Ace crossed his arms with a cold look on his face. “After the insanity that teapot tyrant put me through, I’m not in the mood for whatever this is. Just

leave me alone. Or if you wanna sit there and make fun of this collar, then I got a few ideas of my own, okay!”

“Heh heh heh,” Chenya chuckled. “Riddle, a tyrant? I get it. You’re not actually wrong there. That guy’s always been strict, ever since he was wee.”

Maybe he had witnessed the earlier exchange, or maybe he had determined Riddle was the culprit from seeing Ace’s collar. Either way, Chenya spoke of Riddle quite familiarly, and Yuya had only ever heard Trey talk about him so casually. “Do you maybe know Riddle well?” he asked.

“I may know him if knowing’s where it’s at.” Chenya grinned. “Or I may not if knowing’s where it’s not.”

“That’s not an answer!” Grim cried. “Quit futzing around, you jerk. Pick one already!”

Chenya was slippery, giving the group nothing to grab on to, and he had a profoundly mysterious air about him. His lips pulled back into a crescent moon of a smile. “Whaaat? You guys wanna know about Riddle? His four-eyed friend’s got the answer.”

“Four-eyed friend?” Deuce frowned. “You mean Clover?”

“What?” Chenya stared at him blankly.

“He knows a lot about Riddle.”

“Who?”

“Clover! Are you messing with me right now?” Deuce yelled angrily, and Chenya laughed airily.

“Oh, sure. That kid’s known Riddle real well since they were wee babes. If I wanted to know something about Riddle, I’d head straight for four-eyes.”

“Since they were wee babes ...” Deuce frowned. “You mean before starting school here? Were Clover and Rosehearts friends growing up?”

“So that’s why they’re all buddy-buddy.” Ace glared at the door to the garden. “But they don’t seem like they’ve known each other since they were kids.”

“Well, if that’s what you think, then that’s how it is. What’re you asking me for?” Chenya said and whirled around. “Later!” His body began to disappear from the toes and up.

“Wait!” Yuya called out to stop him, wondering if they’d made him unhappy, but Chenya was only a head again, and he hummed a happy little tune. His head bobbed gently up and down and receded until it eventually disappeared.

“What even was that ...” Deuce murmured. “He was one weird guy.”

They all nodded firmly in agreement.

“We can’t just accept everything this Chenya guy said as fact,” Ace said, after watching the cat boy disappear. “But at any rate, I think we gotta talk to Trey.”

“He said to wait at Ramshackle Dorm because he was going to fix things so that we could apologize and everything’d be okay.” Deuce grinned and shifted his gaze to Ace. “So? You gonna wait like a good little boy?”

“As if. Apologizing just to get this thing off? Not cool, not gonna happen!” Ace grinned in the same daring way as Deuce. “I’m not going to wait for him to come get us. We’re gonna set up a little ambush.”



THE UNBIRTHDAY PARTY went off without a hitch after Ace and the other dissenters were chased out, which undoubtedly led to students letting down their guards.

“Queen of Hearts’ Rule 249—‘Flamingo caretakers are to don pink attire’!” Riddle’s voice rang out through the silent lounge.

The second-year student dropped to his knees, shaking. The blood drained from his cheeks, making the red suit mark on one of them painfully vivid.

“It was supposed to be your turn to feed the flamingos today. And yet you’re in your dorm uniform. Why are you not wearing pink?” Riddle demanded.

“I sincerely apologize, Housewarden,” the second-year pleaded. “My pink clothes were in the laundry. And the flamingos were hungry after the croquet tournament!”

Trey exhaled quietly. They used rainbow flamingos as bats and hedgehogs as balls during the game of croquet played at the unbirthday party. It had been this way ever since the time of the Queen of Hearts, and the exhausted, hungry flamingos needed to be fed right away. The boy was likely telling the truth, but excuses and their ilk had the opposite effect on Riddle.

“*Off with Your Head!*” came Riddle’s merciless verdict.

When a fresh collar appeared around his neck, the poor student screamed and fell over awkwardly. Riddle looked down at him and said, “Do you think I enjoy having to do this? You’re the one who broke the rules! As much as I want to, I cannot ignore these infractions. It’s for your own sake.”

He had essentially told Ace the same thing. In the face of this statement, Trey was powerless to say anything. It had been like this the whole year since Riddle became housewarden.

“Trey, take him away,” Riddle demanded.

“Yes, Housewarden,” Trey said as he looped an arm around the student.

“You’re so mean,” the student wept, his head hanging.

Trey could only support him silently, unable to say anything. Abruptly, he felt the student’s weight shift and become lighter. He looked over to find Cater holding the student’s other arm.

“Trey,” Cater said, abnormally serious. He usually sounded so lighthearted when he called Trey’s name; being sociable was one of the secrets to his success. And Cater only said his name so seriously when it was truly important. “Are you sure this is all okay?”

“There’s nothing I can do,” Trey replied, eyes dark beneath Cater’s reproachful gaze.

“Oh,” Cater said, averting his eyes. He didn’t say anything more.

Trey moved forward, relieved and despairing in equal measure. He didn’t have the luxury of thought. Another incident would push Riddle over the edge. He had to get this student to their room right away.



The red of the evening sun was just beginning to color the sky when Yuya and the others caught sight of their prey. They stood up from the stone stairs in front of the library where they’d been lying in wait.

“We’ve been expecting you, Clover,” Deuce greeted him.

The recipe book with the chestnut tart recipe had been borrowed from the library, and Ace had been certain Trey would come to return it. Sure enough, there he was.

Ace glared up at Trey, who was about half a head taller than he was. “We’ve still got a problem with the way Housewarden Riddle is handling all of this,” he said without preamble.

“I thought you might say that.” Trey gave them a pained smile. He looked even more tired than he had at the party. “And? Are you telling me to do something about it?”

“Not telling you anything,” Ace replied. “Come clean with us. What’s your take on Riddle? You been pandering to him ever since you were kids? His perfect little yes-man?”

“Since we were kids?” Trey frowned. “Who told you that?”

“This guy Chenya,” Yuya replied.

Trey nodded, understanding dawning in his eyes. “Chenya, huh? That explains it.”

“I know you’re the vice housewarden right now, but you’re older than Riddle, right, Clover? Wouldn’t the housewarden listen to his elder?” Deuce asked, as if it were only natural, perhaps thinking that respecting elders was the honor student thing to do.

“Things would be so much better if that were the case.” Trey smiled, vaguely. “But ... I seriously can’t do anything that would be a rejection of him.”

“Geez! I mean, come on, man!” Ace cried out. “You know that both you and the housewarden are actually bonkers, right?”

“You’re scared outta yer head,” Grim spat angrily, “by a guy younger than you. That’s so sad.”

“I can’t,” Trey said as he shook his head slowly. “Everything about Riddle—his entire self—was *created*, as the product of strict rules.”

“Created? By who?” Ace demanded, dissatisfied.

“Can you keep this between us?” Trey asked, and then indicated the nearby benches with his gaze.

The evening sun grew deeper, and the streetlights began to flicker on. The group sat on the two wooden benches beneath a streetlight—Ace and Trey on one, and Deuce, Yuya, and Grim on the other.

Trey began speaking quietly. “Chenya maybe already told you this, but me, Riddle, and Chenya—we’re all from the same place. We grew up together in the same neighborhood. I’ve known of Riddle for ages, long

before he ever knew who I was. His parents are famous magical healers. There's not a soul in our hometown who doesn't know who they are."

"Magical healers?" Yuya frowned. This was an unfamiliar term. He understood the words separately, but he couldn't quite understand what they meant in this world.

"Mm." Deuce beside him nodded firmly. "Like, super doctors who use magic."

"What kind of explanation is that?" Ace rolled his eyes and looked at Yuya. "They heal spells that are cast on patients and use magic to help with difficult treatments. I guess real high-level treatments for some races can only be done by magical healers. More than a few Night Raven College grads end up as magical healers. My brother says it's pretty elite."

"Yeah, it's a difficult job," Trey agreed. "Only some doctors can make it all the way to that level, and Riddle's mom is especially gifted."

"Oh, that makes sense. He's basically a spoiled brat." Ace snorted in laughter. "Like he was brought up with a silver spoon in his mouth? Totally tracks with his selfish little baby ways."

"It's the other way around." Trey shook his head forcefully from side to side. "His mom demanded the same kind of perfection from Riddle. She built up this very regimented life for him, so he was constantly studying, from the time he woke up to when his head hit the pillow. He told me his days were scheduled down to the minute."

"To the minute?" Ace and Deuce gasped, their eyes opening wide in surprise.

Yuya was also stunned. A young child stuck in a life of constant supervision? He thought back to his own childhood. He'd been a quiet kid who spent a lot of time at home alone, and although his life hadn't been particularly eventful, it hadn't been hard. While he hadn't had friends, his days were carefree and peaceful in the way only a child's life can be.

"Whoa, pretty strict." Grim screwed up his face. "Mya heh."

Strict. Maybe that was the only word that described it.

"It wasn't just his schedule," Trey continued. "Everything was decided for him—what he ate, what he wore, what soap he used, who his friends were. One time, when we were little, I asked him what his favorite color was, and you know what the guy said? 'Mother told me to like green because it's good for my vision.' I mean, she even picked his favorite color

for him! I can't even imagine what that would feel like." He smiled faintly, lost in his memories, his expression resigned, befitting the remembrance of a past he could do nothing about.

None of the other students could imagine Riddle's childhood, as it went beyond strict; it was a life without freedom. It wasn't normal for a young child to be forced to live with countless rules.

"Riddle followed her rules without complaint, though," Trey told them. "He wanted to live up to his parents' expectations. He perfected that signature spell when he was ten. Naturally, when it comes to grades, he's been at the top of his class ever since middle school. He's still at the top even here at Night Raven College, which maybe gives you an idea of how amazing he is, yeah?"

Ace and Deuce fell silent, troubled looks on their faces. Naturally, they understood only too well how competitive this prestigious school was, and the fact that Riddle had managed to learn his fearsome signature spell at the tender age of ten gave them food for thought as mages themselves.

"Ten years old? At that point, I hadn't even manifested any magic yet. I was just out there fooling around. And I mean, my grades," Deuce sighed and looked at Trey with a complicated mix of emotions on his face. "The housewarden really is incredible, huh? And it's not just a matter of talent or whatever. You can't accomplish everything he has without a lot of hard work."

"Mm-hmm. That's why Riddle's convinced that binding people with rigid guidelines is for their own benefit. In his eyes, it's a fast track to personal growth. Because that's how it worked for him," Trey said.

"So when he told Ace this was all for our sakes, that was how he really feels?" Deuce asked. "I just assumed ..."

"You thought he was being mean?" Trey shook his head. "No. That's Riddle's unvarnished truth. At the very least, *I* think it is. Listen, why do you think Riddle's so strict about the Queen of Hearts' rules?"

"'Cause he loves hatin' on the dorm students," Grim replied immediately. "All 'I'm the housewarden! Obey me!'"

Trey gave him a pained smile. "Of course, he feels a responsibility as the housewarden of Heartslabyul, but regulations have always been more important than anything to Riddle. He sees the violation of those rules as an inexcusable offense."

“Why’s that?” Grim looked baffled, but Yuya more or less knew the answer.

“Because if he accepts that rules can be broken,” he said slowly, “then that’s basically a rejection of his own self. Because he was created by rules.” Trey nodded at the group.

So that *was* it. To Riddle, his own past experience was the entire world.

A strict life with no freedom. That Riddle had then become an accomplished student and mage was maybe not the ideal result. Given his own marvelous achievements, he was no doubt convinced that this rigidity was the correct way of doing things, and it made sense that he would impose the same restrictions on the dorm students.

Trey looked at Ace and then turned his gaze on the others. “Look, I totally get why you see Riddle as a tyrant. And I know his way of doing things is not right. But I ... I can’t bring myself to hold that against him. Because I know what he’s gone through—all the things that pushed him to this point.”

Seeing his grave face, Yuya, Deuce, and even Grim were at a loss for words.

Ace was the only one to recover. “All right, now I get it,” he said as he stood up and pointed an accusing finger at Trey. “It’s *your* fault Riddle’s like this.”

“What?” Yuya said, doubting his ears.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Grim and Deuce whispered from where they sat on either side of him.

Yuya could only reply, “I don’t know either.”

Trey’s fault? As Yuya listened to Trey telling them about Riddle’s painful past, he did feel like Trey was a bit too nice, but he hadn’t thought Trey bore any responsibility, like Ace was saying.

Ace’s words seemed to surprise Trey as well. His eyes grew rounder, and he gaped at the lowerclassman, but Ace paid no attention to him. “Riddle didn’t get to choose his parents,” Ace continued in an even more forceful tone. “That’s too bad, but it’s a fact. Can’t change that. But from the way you’re talking, you pretty much always thought what his parents were doing to him was wrong, yeah?”

“I ...” Trey started, and then fell silent. His lips moved several times, as if he felt compelled to say something, but no sound came out.

“Sure, you couldn’t stop the grown-ups. You were a kid, too. But Riddle’s making the exact same mistake his parents did, and you gotta tell him to his face: ‘This is bad. You gotta stop.’ You gotta correct him! You’re going easy on him because he had it rough as a kid? Don’t you see where that’s leading? You’re letting him become a pariah!”

“Ace, man, come on,” Deuce said and leaned forward. “You’re going too far.”

“But I mean, it’s true,” Ace protested. “There isn’t a single person in our dorm who likes that guy right now.”

Deuce was pressed for a response. It was cruel, but it was true. The guys they saw in the cafeteria, classmates they bumped into during breaks—every Heartslabyul student they encountered had only harsh words to say about Riddle, such as “I can’t breathe with that guy around” and “I don’t want to go back to the dorm.”

Trey and Cater alone were different. Yuya had seen them cover for the housewarden so many times now, and he’d always assumed that they must like him. But hearing Trey acknowledge Riddle’s mistakes like this, he realized he didn’t truly understand how they really felt. Maybe it wasn’t strictly a matter of like or dislike—maybe it was just that they were Riddle’s allies in the end.

“So what then?” Ace said, glaring at Trey. “Sympathy keeping your mouth shut? Or are you afraid he’ll take your head off, too? That’s pathetic!”

The area was dark now, but Ace’s eyes glittered beneath the streetlamps, and the anger that burned in them paired perfectly with the words he spat out at Trey, bearing the full force of Ace’s spirit. “You say all this stuff, acting like you’re the nice guy here. But the fact is, you just don’t want to rock the boat. You’re afraid of having to bring it up. That’s all, isn’t it? You guys are supposed to be friends?! Then act like it!”

There was no response from Trey. He was hanging his head, and his face was in shadow, so Yuya couldn’t even read his expression.

It was Yuya who broke the silence. “Sorry,” he said.

“Huh?” Ace looked at him curiously. “Why’re you apologizing? I’m talking about Trey here.”

“Because I get it,” he replied. “When everyone was yelling at you, saying you were wrong, I really wanted to tell them you weren’t wrong. I wanted

to stand up and be an ally. But I was so scared I couldn't say anything."

Yuya felt he could understand Trey and his inability to stop Riddle. Pointing out that something bad was bad, making someone mad at you—those were scary things. He'd experienced the terror that made someone freeze in place several times. An aversion to rocking the boat? The self-protective urge to not stir things up? He knew these feelings painfully well.

Deuce had been dazzling as he stood by Ace's side, and Yuya was jealous. He thought Ace was exactly right to push Trey now, and he was ashamed of himself for running away. He was so pathetic he could hardly stand it.

Lowering his head, he felt the corners of his eyes burning hotly. If he cried now, he would be so miserable he would have to crawl into a hole and never come out again. He took a deep breath and pushed the tears back.

"Huh? You ... Is that why you've been acting weird?" Ace asked, sounding so surprised that Yuya timidly raised his face. Perhaps seeing the redness of his eyes even in the dark, Ace gave him a stunned look. "That's just stupid! I never asked you to do that. If I went around forcing people to be on my side, I'd be pulling the same dictatorial stuff as Riddle."

"Huh? No, but you were in real trouble," Yuya protested. "And you were angry at how scared everyone was."

"That's 'cause they've all been whispering behind the guy's back. The way I figure it, if you've got something to say, then stand up and say it. But, Yu, you hate fighting, and that's valid, so you don't have to force yourself into a fight just to stick up for me. Jump into the mix, sit back and watch, whatever—you do you, man." He glanced at Trey and smiled maliciously. "Unlike *somebody* here, you'll tell me if you think I'm wrong."

"Ha ha ha!" laughed Deuce, who stood beside him. "You're really getting carried away. I mean, this from the guy who begged for backup to go apologize to the housewarden."

"Yeah, 'zactly!" Grim chimed in as he bobbed his head up and down. "And now you're actin' like you're better than us, all holier than thou."

"Shut yer trap," Ace growled. "Look. If you say something I don't like, I'm gonna argue with it, okay? But I'm not gonna get mad at you for it. I'm not a baby."

Even while peevishly sulking, Ace was so strong. Yuya looked at him in awe. He'd never met anyone like him before. At first, he'd been afraid of

Ace. After getting dragged into the mess he and Grim had caused, Yuya had felt like Ace was a hassle to be avoided. He was contrary, glib, and immature. But Yuya now realized he was also trustworthy and reliable.

Ace would never run from something scary. Yuya thought the way Ace didn't hesitate to face whatever trouble might confront him was extremely cool. Even Yuya, who had avoided growing close with others before now, could appreciate how precious Ace's resolve was.

"You make sure to get yourself set up to run away from fights, though, Yu," Ace told him. "I can't have your back all the time."

"Right ... Got it. Thanks." Yuya said with a smile, and Ace grinned back at him. He looked relieved, though perhaps he was just awkward with sentimentality.

Deuce also seemed relieved at seeing Yuya back to his usual self.

"You don't gotta listen to anything Ace says," Grim said to Yuya.

"Do you even know what we're talking about?" Ace asked, arching an eyebrow at the monster.

"Not a clue," Grim told him happily. "I'm just annoyed at you being all high and mighty."

"I'll agree with you on the high-and-mighty part, but he's not wrong," Deuce said. He patted Yuya's shoulder. "And, Yu, you don't need to get all bummed out. It was thanks to you telling me that it was okay to go against the housewarden that I was able to stand up for Ace myself."

"Huh?" Surprised, Yuya shook his head back and forth. "I never said anything like that, though?"

"You told me that standing up and saying that something is wrong when it's wrong, instead of gritting my teeth and putting up with it, is also the honor student thing to do, didn't you?"

Yuya gaped at Deuce as he realized he had indeed said that. He hadn't wanted to see Deuce looking so glum, not when he'd been so amazing and had stuck up for Yuya against those delinquents, so he'd tried to tell him everything he truly felt. But he'd never imagined that this would give Deuce the push he needed to stand up for Ace in such a dazzling way. Yuya nearly shouted with joy and awe at the thought that Deuce, a boy who seemed so fully developed, with his strong convictions, would be inspired by his own words.

“Yu here says some wise stuff sometimes, huh? Myah ha ha!” Grim laughed merrily. “That’s my hench-human for ya! So I guess *I’m* the real reason you could go all out, Deuce.”

Deuce scoffed, “Grim, get your feet back on the ground. Most of the trouble Yu’s gotten caught up in was your fault.” Deuce glanced up. “The rest of it was your fault, Ace.”

“The whole chandelier thing was *your* fault!” Ace protested, hotly.

“Um, that’s all over now,” Yuya interjected. “Don’t fight.”

The boys cursed at each other, while Trey watched them silently from the bench to the side, until his gaze abruptly shifted.

“Ooooh! Aaaah! Beautifuuuul!” came a sudden voice from behind Yuya. When he looked back, the headmage was standing there, pressing a handkerchief to the corners of his eyes.

“Headmage?!” Deuce exclaimed and leaped to his feet. Yuya and Grim also took a step back in surprise. How long had he been standing there? The headmage’s black clothes blended into the night like camouflage.

“Friendship in conflict, the passion of youth,” the headmage sighed. “It’s tremendously moving. I might just use Mr. Trappola’s words in my next speech before the student body.”

“Don’t you dare!” Ace exclaimed as his face turned red with anger. “I take it all back!”

“Headmage Crowley, what are you doing here?” Yuya asked.

A single eye closed beneath his mask. A wink, apparently. “Just doing a little research in the library. I’m quite curious myself about your original world, Yu. But when Mr. Clover invited you into this conversation with such an unusually serious look on his face, my interest was naturally piqued, and here I am,” the headmage said.

“So you’ve been here from, like, the first second.” Ace sighed and his shoulders slumped.

“Headmage, this is—” Cater began as he stood up, and the headmage checked him with a hand.

“Now, now. It’s not the least bit unusual for there to be trouble in a dorm. Naturally, it’d be best if there weren’t, but we must make do,” the headmage said.

“Yes, sir.” Trey said as he bowed. “I’m so sorry for the disturbance. I’ll get things under control soon.”

“Huh? Get things under control? You’re still talking that garbage,” Ace complained. Deuce and Grim also crossed their arms and scowled. “There’s absolutely *zero* chance of me bowing down and apologizing to Riddle like all those other guys!”

“Myah! No way I’m saying sorry to that selfish jerk!” Grim chimed in.

“Grim is one thing, but what are you planning to do, Ace? Deuce?” Trey asked. “At some point, when you get the collars off, you will have to go back to the dorm. If you don’t apologize, it’ll be nearly impossible to get Riddle to forgive you. You can’t crash at Ramshackle Dorm forever. The academy would never give you a pass to stay out, to start with. Right?” He looked to the headmage for backup.

“That is true.” The headmage nodded. “Special permissions simply ruin public morals. A fundamental principle of the college is that students spend time in their own dorms. But if you simply cannot get along with the housewarden, then you also have the option of transferring.”

“Transferring? You mean they can change which dorm they’re in?” Yuya was pretty sure he’d heard dorms were selected based on the nature of one’s essence. He recalled the sensation of the Dark Mirror rifling through his insides, a bizarre feeling he’d never experienced before. He hadn’t needed anyone to explain to him that something special was happening. The process to determine the dorm assignment seemed serious. How could it be possible to change it?

“It does happen from time to time,” Crowley told him. “Outside of issues with the original dorm, a student may discover a subject they desperately wish to study in another dorm. Or students with more than a single essence may struggle with advancement. Overturning the decision of the Dark Mirror does necessitate quite a burdensome process and a new ritual, but it is not impossible.”

A transfer would be one way of handling this, but since Ramshackle Dorm wasn’t recognized as an official dorm, Ace and Deuce probably wouldn’t be able to move in there. One of the other dorms might accept them, however. Some bad blood would remain, but the transfer would draw a line in the conflict with Riddle, and the whole thing would die down soon enough.

Or so Yuya thought, but Ace looked like he wasn’t having any of it. “But that would make me feel like I was running away with my tail between my

legs. Doesn't feel right to me," he challenged.

"In that case," the headmage said, and clapped his hands as if to start down another track. "Why don't you simply challenge Mr. Rosehearts for the leadership of Heartslabyul?"

"What?!" everyone except for the headmage cried out in unison.

Trey stared in disbelief. "Headmage, please! That's absurd!" he protested.

Ace shoved Trey aside and leaped at the idea. "Is that even possible?" he asked. "For real?"

"Of course." Crowley nodded. "There are several ways to become housewarden. Quite often, they are appointed by the previous housewarden, but more than a few housewardens obtained their positions via a duel against the current housewarden."

"The headmage is right. It's a possibility," Trey said reluctantly. "And since it's forbidden to handicap your opponent before the duel, you could get Riddle to remove the collar without having to apologize to him. But that's—I mean, what would Riddle say?"

"Oh dear," the headmage said smoothly. "Would he be especially bothered by this? After all, Mr. Rosehearts himself did that very same thing to obtain his own seat of housewarden. A week after orientation."

"A week?!" Ace and Deuce gasped, reeling.

"Housewarden in a week," Ace repeated as he shook his head slowly. "That jerk. So that's why he swaggers around like the king of the castle!"

"Um. I'm not sure I really understand," Yuya interjected. "Isn't that kind of amazing?"

"Yeah. He holds the record for second place in the centuries-long history of Night Raven College." Trey shrugged. "Riddle has his regrets there, though. Says he should've laid down the glove on his first day and taken number one."

"The nerve of this guy!" Ace muttered, and Yuya reflexively nodded. Apparently, elections were for the weak, and Riddle had won his seat of housewarden in a way that made people coo in admiration. Of course that was how they would do it at Night Raven College.

"The right to challenge a housewarden is bestowed upon all students when enrolling at the academy. Naturally, this means you all as well." The headmage looked at Ace. "So what do you say, Mr. Trappola?"

Yuya didn't have to hear his response to know what Ace would say.

"Yassss!" Ace cried out excitedly, and he grinned audaciously like the challenger he was. "I'll give him a run for his money. And then *I'll* be housewarden and show him a thing or two! Plus, if I make housewarden now, I'll beat his record of a week, yeah? I can practically see him foaming at the mouth."

"I'll do it, too," Deuce said and clenched his hands into fists.

"Aah," Trey sighed, looking up at the sky. "You gotta be kidding me. Even you, Deuce?"

"Please don't try to stop me, Clover," Deuce told him. "I've been thinking about this for a long time. It's never been my nature to begrudgingly follow orders when I'm unhappy with the team leader, and every man's gotta make a grab for glory at least once in his lifetime!"

"There he is, the little delinquent." Ace grinned, in high spirits.

"Me! Me!" Grim waved a hand in the air. "I'll do it, too! I'll mess that little grouch up real bad, and show everyone the magical genius of the mighty Grim!"

"I'm afraid not, Grim." The headmage cut off his happy declaration. "You cannot challenge a housewarden of a dorm to which you do not belong."

"Myah?! Then how'm I supposed to get this buzzkill collar off? I can't sit around twiddlin' my thumbs and wait for it to fall off on its own!"

"Relax." Ace waved a nonchalant hand. "Once I'm housewarden, I'll order Riddle to take it off. Easy-peasy!"

"You're already bossing him around," Yuya sighed. His spirits sank at the thought of another fight. If Ace hadn't just told him he didn't have to force himself to stand up in a fight and that it was okay for him to do what he wanted, he would have felt battered in this moment. Why did these fights keep happening? It had only been a few days since he'd started school there.

"Don't worry," Ace told him. "You can just sit back and watch, Yu."

"To be honest, it's hard to imagine we can beat the housewarden with straightforward magic," Deuce said. "A solid left hook, on the other hand ..."

"Nice!" Ace's face lit up. "It'd feel so good to punch his smarmy little face right in the kisser."

“Oh!” Headmage Crowley said. “I should mention that any attacks other than those of a magical nature are prohibited in the duel.”

“Huh?” Ace and Deuce stared at him blankly.

“Obviously.” Trey rolled his eyes. “What do you guys even think the housewarden is? We’re talking about the famed Night Raven College here.”

“Mr. Clover is quite right. This is not about personal vendettas. This is a formal contest for the seat of housewarden at an arcane academy. Naturally, you shall compete on magical power. I will stand as witness to ensure that the duel is carried out under fair conditions. Please do stand tall and do battle using only your own magic,” the headmage said.

Ace and Deuce looked at each other, considering this news.

Riddle, the guy who had learned his signature spell at the age of ten, who was always at the top of his class, who had become housewarden a mere week after he started school—the boy no one could disobey ... They were supposed to have a contest of magic with *him*? Even with the most generous outlook, it was easy to see that this would be an uphill fight.

“One other thing!” Crowley held up a finger. “I forgot to mention the most important part.”

“Yeah, yeah. What now?” Ace asked, with an edge of desperation. *Whatever*. His thought came through loud and clear.

In sharp contrast to Ace’s attitude, the headmage looked almost shockingly serious. “Please take care that you do not overuse your magic.”

The air around them immediately grew heavier. “Oh.” Ace straightened up, slowly. “You’re talking about blot, right?”

Trey and Deuce looked equally grave. Yuya understood that whatever they were talking about was important, but he had no idea what was going on. What was “blot”? Why did everyone have that same look on their faces? What happened when you overused your magic?

“Aah, you wouldn’t know about this, would you, Yu? Allow me to explain. I am nothing if not benevolent!” the headmage said as he sat them all down on the benches again and cleared his throat, taking his place before them, as if he were about to start a lecture. He clasped his hands behind his back and looked at them professorially. “Blot is something akin to a waste material created when magic is used. You said you have automotives in your world as well, yes? An automotive consumes fuel to run, and at the same time, it emits exhaust gas. In a similar fashion, spells

consume magic to manifest and discharge blot. You might visualize it like that.”

“It’s exhaust gas?” Yuya murmured. Magic still seemed like a fantastical dream to him, so “exhaust gas” felt much too ordinary, too workaday. It made him imagine something harmful to both the human body and the natural world.

The headmage paced back and forth before them. “A great deal of research on the nature of blot has been conducted since the start of recorded history, and yet it is still a substance of many mysteries. There is one thing that we know for certain, however.” He stopped neatly in front of Yuya. “Blot is extremely poisonous. It is dangerous for a mage’s body and soul.”

“Something that scary exists?!” Grim cried in surprise, which surprised Yuya. He was impressed that Grim had made it this far in life with his hair-trigger use of magic without knowing this fact. Ace and the others also shivered.

“You didn’t know about blot? It’s like the most basic of basics, man,” Ace said. “Ever since I was a kid, my parents have been like a broken record—don’t go fooling with magic, you’ll build up blot.”

“Why do you think we give you magical pens when you start school here?” Crowley said. “Oh! I guess it’s not a pen for you, Grim, but a pendant. Nevertheless, the fact remains.”

“Pendant?” Grim looked down. A pale-purple magestone hung undaunted below the oversized and obvious collar Riddle had saddled him with.

“That magestone bears the burden of the mage’s blot,” the headmage informed him.

“Huh.” Grim stroked the purple gem, pleased. “All clear then.”

“No, far from it,” Crowley warned, his voice suddenly low and cold. “There is a limit to how much any magestone can bear. You can reduce blot through sufficient rest. If you neglect to do so and continue to use magic, however, blot spreads like an ink stain until the magestone turns jet black. Once that happens, blot will build up inside the mage’s body ... until it eventually overflows.”

The assembled students swallowed hard.

“This you must avoid at all costs. The very lives of the mage and the people in the vicinity are in danger in such a situation.”

Magic was not a panacea. Now, after all this time, Yuya realized that this saying was literally true. He should have had his doubts the moment he learned there was such a thing as an arcane academy. If magic was something that just anyone could control, then they wouldn't need schools for it.

"Do you understand how very dangerous it is to overuse magic?" Crowley asked to drive the point home.

"Yes." Yuya nodded firmly. Ace, Deuce, Grim, and even the third-year Trey nodded, serious looks on their faces.

"Well, with the amount of magic Mr. Trappola and Mr. Spade have, I do think we needn't be particularly concerned about this possibility, hm!" Crowley checked that they were all paying attention, and then broke out into a smile. "The amount of magic varies widely and wildly depending on the mage. But almost every individual has the same amount of blot tolerance. Which is why the more powerful the mage, the more careful they must be when using that power. On that point, mages at your level are not likely to generate a significant blot even if you called upon your magic until the point of exhaustion."

"So then why even mention it at all?!" Ace cried. "Geez!"

"Safety first." The headmage gave them a sunny thumbs-up. "In the worst-case scenario, if such a thing were to happen on campus and specifically during an official duel, observers would naturally call into question my guidance and leadership as headmage. You must please, please take all due caution!"

"Are you really going to fight Riddle?" Yuya asked Ace and Deuce worriedly. Now that he knew the scary part of having magic, he didn't want them to use it so casually.

But they had both made up their minds.

"Yup." Ace nodded. "Like I'm gonna run and hide now."

"Yeah. Strike while the iron's hot and all that. We'll fight tomorrow to beat the housewarden's record, too. No objections, right?" An audacious grin spread across Deuce's face. "No mercy just 'cause we're up against the housewarden. I'm taking the throne!"

"Understood. Then I shall prepare and file the paperwork, so I will excuse myself now. Gentlemen, I wish you a pleasant duel tomorrow, in full observation of the rules!" Crowley said as he swept away.

Once the headmage was gone, anxiety crept into Yuya. “Are you sure?” he asked again.

“Aah, y’know, I may not be the world’s greatest mage,” Ace confessed. “But dropping out now’s not on the table. I’ll figure something out!”

“Yeah!” Deuce agreed.

Only at a time like this were Ace and Deuce of the same opinion, so Yuya swallowed his objections. He was concerned about this blot, but the headmage had also said they were probably safe, so maybe things would be okay. He forced himself to push his worries aside. He hadn’t been able to come up with any other way to resolve this mess, so he had no right to stop them to begin with.

“My head’s on the line here, too,” Grim told them. “Don’t mess this up!”

“Of course,” Ace said, flashing him a grin. “When I’m housewarden, I’m gonna make Riddle fess up to bein’ wrong. I’ll make him apologize, too! And no one in the dorm is gonna have to live by any nonsense rules ever again!”

“You guys ...” Trey sighed, exasperated. Maybe he hadn’t fully digested the whole duel situation yet.

Standing before his upperclassman, Ace announced mercilessly, “Go back to the dorm and tell him to get ready, ’cause Ace is comin’!”

Upon their arrival back at Ramshackle Dorm that night, the ghosts stared at the students with wide eyes. After Ace and Deuce had left that morning with a thank-you for the kind hospitality, the ghosts had never imagined they would be returning in the evening.

“Who coulda thunk your friends’d be coming over again today?” a ghost said.

“I mean, we’re all thrilled an’ everything. But you sure you don’t need to get back to your own dorm?” said another.

“There’s a, well, a situation there.” Yuya gave them a quick rundown, and the ghosts began to laugh loudly. Their laughter was so intense that Yuya worried they might start bouncing around the room.

“Aah, perfect. This! This here’s why I c’n never give up being a ghost at Night Raven College!” said the first ghost.

“What?” Ace demanded. He frowned in a half pout. “You making fun of us?”

“Not a chance! We’re just really feelin’ how wonderful youth is,” the second ghost told him, panting for breath. It was weird that they got short of breath when they laughed too hard, even though they were ghosts. Or maybe it was simply that they were imitating the things they’d done back when they were alive. As they verbally sparred with Ace, the ghosts looked a bit jealous.

The first ghost continued, “In your short human lives, there’s only like a quick second where you c’n do this stuff—jump into the ring with someone like it’s life or death. Once you’re grown up, it’s all over. And there’s no chance of anything like that happening when you’re dead, o’course. Only when you’re kids c’n you throw your whole self into something, ’cause you got no past—only a future. Prob’ly won’t make that there connection while you’re at Night Raven College, though.”

“Hee hee hee! We’ll pack lunches and come watch tomorrow!” said the third ghost.

“You don’t have to. It’s not a show,” Deuce said, glaring at them. He probably didn’t love being called a kid.

The ghosts winced. “We’ll go get some sheets,” they said, fading from view.

Just like the night before, they all made camp in Yuya’s room and quickly turned out the lights. After the long day, they were a little fatigued, and they also wanted to get to bed early in preparation for the big fight the next day.

Yuya lay in bed, but sleep wouldn’t come. Ace and Deuce seemed to be having the same problem; he could hear them tossing and turning. He just had too many concerns racing through his brain to give himself so easily over to sleep.

“Trey looked pretty dark, huh?” Yuya said quietly. He recalled the upperclassman returning to Heartslabyul, his slumped back receding from view as he headed toward the Hall of Mirrors alone. Yuya wondered how he was doing now.

“It’s ’cause you were so harsh, Ace,” Deuce accused.

“Whatever!” Ace snorted. “I only told him the truth.”

“But y’know, after hearing Clover talk, I kind of get why Housewarden Rosehearts is like that,” Deuce mused. “I mean, I don’t *get it* get it, which is exactly why it feels like, ohhh, maybe that’s it. Studying every day,

always getting top marks, living up to impossible expectations—I’ve got zero experience there.”

“Nah, all that doesn’t matter. Like, throwing himself into things the way he does is just weird right out of the gate, whatever his reasons. It’s stupid.” Ace let out a short guffaw. “I guess *the* Malleus Draconia goes to Night Raven. He’s housewarden of Diasomnia, right? Maybe that’s part of it, y’know?”

Malleus Draconia. Yuya felt like he’d heard that name somewhere before. “Is he famous?” he asked.

“You don’t know him—oh, wait, why would you?” Ace laughed. “Malleus Draconia, he’s a famous mage. He’s fairy folk, and I heard he’s a prince of some place. Got some serious magic guns. One of the top five mages in the whole world.”

“Oh! The guy they were talking about at the orientation!” Yes. The Diasomnia vice housewarden had mentioned Malleus at the orientation, and the other students had also whispered rumors about him. Even though it had only been a few days ago, it felt like ancient history.

“Mph!” Next to Yuya, Grim wrinkled his nose. “Is he really such a hotshot? I’m not into the whole thing where he gets more attention than me.”

“Hey! I’ll tell you right now. Don’t even try it with Malleus Draconia,” Ace warned him. “He could turn you to dust.”

“Yeah,” Deuce agreed. “I’ve heard about Draconia. He always has a bunch of people with him as guards, and he almost never shows himself in public.”

“Guards? These Diasomnia guys, man, you can’t even get close to them.” Yuya could almost hear Ace rolling his eyes. “I heard that’s the dorm with all the guys who are, like, magic geniuses. The ones in our class are all prim and proper, too—they’ve got this VIP air. You’d be too scared to say a word to them.”

“It’s not just that,” Deuce said. “Draconia came to Heartslabyul once on some errand or something. And all the roses in the maze, they just iced over and died.”

In the back of his mind, Yuya saw the Heartslabyul maze, that tremendous path of roses spreading out endlessly under the blue sky. What

kind of powerful and terrifying magic had he used to make all of them wither?

Grim shivered next to him.

“Yikes!” Ace cried. “That’s totally a threat, like, you guys are next!”

“Well, I didn’t see it myself, so I don’t know all the details. But you think there’s some connection between Draconia being here and Housewarden Rosehearts being so intense about everything?” Deuce asked.

“Well, the current housewardens are all on the same level as that monster dude, right?” Ace replied. “People are probably watching them no matter where they go. And that’s gotta put you on edge in a real way. He seems like the show-off type.”

“I dunno,” Deuce said. “There’s that whole thing about how he’s obeyed rules since way before he started school here. I think maybe Housewarden Rosehearts would have still been super strict even without the competition of the other housewardens.”

“Well then, we’re screwed!” Ace groaned.

As he listened to the two of them talking, Yuya felt anxiety fill his heart. Heartslabyul’s Riddle. Savanaclaw’s Leona.

The two housewardens he’d met so far had a presence that instantly made him stand up straighter the moment he set eyes on them. Diasomnia’s Malleus was no doubt the same. These were people with the power and personality to keep the wild students of Night Raven College in line. There were only seven of them in the whole school, and Ace and Deuce were going to fight one.

“Careful not to get hurt tomorrow, okay?” Yuya said, his voice strained.

“You bet!” Ace and Deuce replied, their tone light. It was exactly the response he’d expected, but he still couldn’t not give them that warning.

“That reminds me,” Deuce said. “We still haven’t decided who’s gonna fight the housewarden first.”

“Oh, you can go first,” Ace replied immediately.

“You sure? I figured you’d be all, ‘I said I was fighting him first, so obviously I have the right to go first.’”

“Nah. I figure I’ll get you to wear him down a bit. Getting in there afterward is the smart thing to do.”

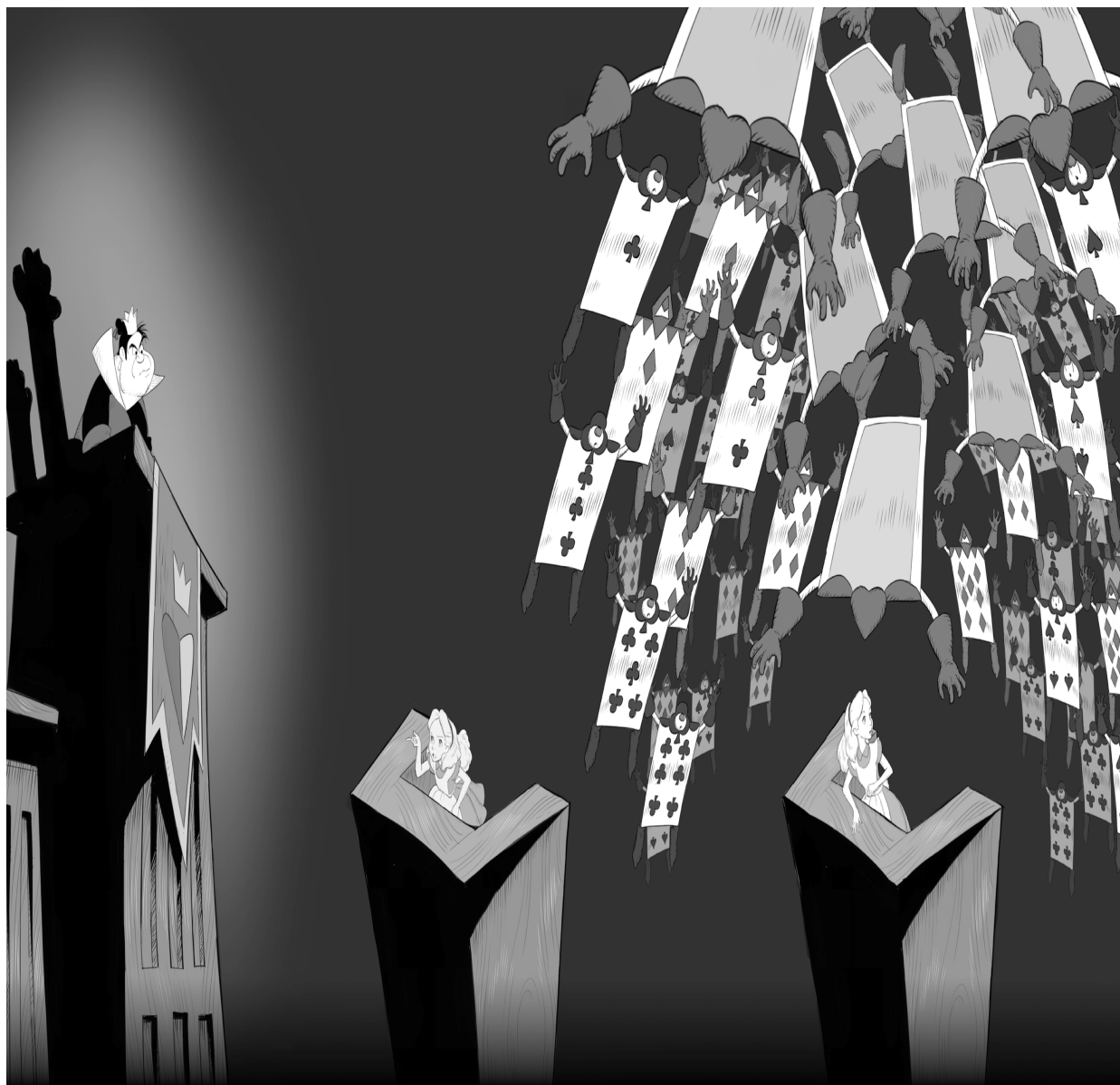
“What? Are you trying to say I’m going to lose?!”

Ace and Deuce continued bickering the same way they had the night before. But no matter how animated and eager they were, Yuya's anxiety remained a heavy ball of lead at the bottom of his stomach.

Grim opened his mouth and yawned. Yuya closed his eyes in an attempt to hurry himself to sleep.

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“Another strange dream?”



ALICE: And as for you, Your Majesty... "Your Majesty," indeed!
Why, you're not a queen. You're just a pompous, bad-tempered old ty...tyrant!

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Mmmmmmmhmmhmm... What were you saying, my dear?

CHESHIRE CAT: Well, she simply said that you're a pompous, bad-tempered old tyrant! ♪

QUEEN OF HEARTS: Ooooooooff with her head!

CARDS: Ooooooh!!

KING OF HEARTS: You heard what Her Majesty said! Off with her head!



WHEN YUYA WOKE UP, he was suffocating. Something was blocking his nose. He lifted his head to find that it was just Grim's leg. He could hear Ace's and Deuce's voices from far away. It seemed they were talking to the ghosts.

"We got bread an' a nice meaty soup from the chef ghost in the cafeteria. You're not gonna be able to produce any power on an empty stomach. You'd best eat here before you go," a ghost said.

"Ooh! Thoughtful! Thanks!" Ace replied.

"Sure thing! Chef's looking forward to the duels today, too."

"Hey. I *said* it's not a show."

Yuya heard a loud *creak*. It was the sound of the lounge door opening. Either Ace or Deuce was no doubt coming to wake him and Grim up. Sitting up, Yuya shook his hazy head.

He felt like he'd had nothing but weird dreams since coming to this world. Previously he had felt sure he'd seen that intense woman somewhere before, but today he finally realized who she was. She was one of the Great Seven, the Queen of Hearts.

Maybe he was dreaming of her because her legend had made a real impression on him? But the Queen of Hearts had supposedly been an excellent queen who had led her people with law and order, albeit strictly. Yet the woman who appeared in his dreams was very different from the one in the tale Ace had told him. Plus, the story advanced like he was

watching a movie, and as such he couldn't interact with anything. He had only been able to observe from the sidelines, even as he wondered why no one would stop this queen, which stirred up feelings of frustration in him.

Perhaps his dream resembled the situation they were in now. That made sense. Was that why he was having these weird dreams? As he awoke further, the pieces continued to come together for him, and Yuya was able to reassure himself that there was nothing strange about his dreams. He reflected on the scene that was already starting to fade from his memory.

A queen crazed with rage demanding the head of a little girl, and the cards trying to obey her. Countless cards scattered all over the place. What exactly were they thinking as they followed the queen's orders?



“Acey and Deucey are challenging Riddle for the housewarden's seat?!” Cater cried as he came flying at Trey in the garden at Heartslabyul, the chosen venue for the duels. All the color had drained from his face.

Trey had been busy preparing for the event, but now he hung his head guiltily.

“Please tell me this is a joke!” Cater grabbed his shoulders. “I mean, a duel? Where'd that come from?”

“Sorry. I tried to stop them, but ...” Deuce trailed off. Perhaps realizing it was pointless for him to wait for him to continue, Cater sighed. When Trey timidly lifted his face, there was no anger or sadness on Cater's, only simple exasperation.

“Honestly,” he said. “Those two are so reckless.”

Trey thought that Cater was exactly right. He had a very hard time believing either Ace or Deuce was in his right mind, challenging *the* Riddle.

Despite the widespread dissatisfaction with Riddle within the dorm, no one had stepped forward to challenge him since he'd taken on the position of housewarden because Riddle possessed overwhelming power, and the power that specifically discouraged any challengers was his signature spell. Off with Your Head sealed the magic of its target, and in a battle

where only magical attacks were permitted, once that spell was cast, it was all over; his opponent was helpless. No one could hope to unseat Riddle as long as that spell was in play.

“I just hope this doesn’t make everything worse,” Cater murmured, watching as Riddle made his grand entrance. He had no intention of rebuking Riddle, either. He liked his head where it was on his shoulders.

“Yeah,” Trey said, in a voice that only Cater could hear.



The fragrance of the roses was almost suffocating. Perhaps it was due to the enthusiasm of the people gathered in the garden, the students of Heartslabyul pressed up against each other, eager gazes trained to a single spot.

They were all staring at Ace and Deuce, who stood in their dorm uniforms. Facing them was Riddle, his long cape fluttering in the breeze and the crown on his head glittering.

“We are about to commence two challenges for the housewarden position at Heartslabyul Dorm!” the headmage announced. “The first challenger is Ace Trappola, and the second is Deuce Spade. Accepting their challenge is the current housewarden, Riddle Rosehearts.”

The students in the garden began to laugh.

“Challenging Housewarden Rosehearts?! Man, these guys are delusional,” said one student.

“Total idiots. In five seconds, their heads will be gone, and it’ll all be over,” a second student bet.

“Housewarden! Take them out!” crowed yet more students.

Jeers flew from the crowd, the students’ mouths twisted up in sneers. It was more than clear from the way they laughed at Ace and Deuce that they cursed them as stupid first-years, fully expecting them to be destroyed.

These guys have already given up, Yuya thought, clenching his icy hands. They wanted to see Ace and Deuce bowed in misery so they could reassure themselves that this would never happen to them. They wanted to make sure of the housewarden’s power and embrace their own

helplessness; this twisted desire ran rampant through the students of Heartslabyul.

These students naturally avoided Yuya and Grim in the center of the maelstrom, creating a small opening around them in the jostling crowd. Yuya scanned the area and met the eyes of Trey, who shrugged.

"This is a total away game," Yuya murmured, and Grim stared up at him blankly.

"Away game? What's that?" Grim asked.

"Umm. It means fighting in a disadvantageous place with no allies."

"Huh." Grim nodded slightly, and then his attention shifted. "Don't whiff this, Ace! Deuce! You gotta hurry up and get this collar offa me!"

"Now then," Crowley said as he turned to Riddle, solemnly. "In accordance with the duel rules, please remove the magic-sealing collars, as they would provide an unfair disadvantage."

"Yes, sir." Nodding obediently, Riddle flicked his hand in the air. And with that, the shackles that had so tortured Ace and Deuce were removed.

Grim, who had been cheering for them, now yelled, "No fair!"

"Aaah, *finally* that stupid thing's gone," Ace said as he rubbed his neck. He'd had a hard time sleeping again the previous night, and there was no doubt that the last few days had been rough on him.

Beside him, Deuce also let out a sigh of relief. He looked over his surroundings intently, as if concerned for once about having eyes on him. Yuya was surprised he would be so troubled by people staring at him. Earlier that morning, after the ghosts had brought them breakfast and Deuce was stuffing food into his mouth, he had expressed relief that they didn't have to go to the cafeteria. While they ate, he had talked Yuya's ear off about how humiliating it was for a mage to be seen in chains. Ace and Deuce were no doubt fired up and ready to vindicate themselves.

"Enjoy your moment of freedom. The collars will be back on soon enough." Riddle said as he turned cold eyes on them. "I could hardly believe it when I heard you two intended to duel me. Is this a joke?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" Ace challenged.

"I'd never propose a duel as a joke," Deuce said firmly.

"Hmph. Have it your way, then. Let us get this over with," Riddle said, crossing his arms.

Cater waved a hand from the crowd behind them and called out, "Riddle! What do you want to do about today's afternoon tea?"

"What do I want to do? A foolish question," Riddle told him. "I take my tea every day at 4 p.m. sharp. I shall have tea as usual."

"But it's just that it's past 3:30." Smiling, Cater held up his phone. "See?" A diamond-symbol character just like the one on his phone cover pointed at the digital clock on the screen.

What exactly was that smile for? Unlike the other dorm students, Cater was smiling in the same way as when Yuya'd first met him, which made it all the more curious.

Was he warning Ace and Deuce that this was their last chance to back down? Was he asking Riddle to call the whole thing off? He couldn't have actually been excited about the fight. This was Cater's way of trying to stop the duel.

The three fighters ignored his good humor and glared at each other.

"And you fear I will be late?" Riddle asked. "I'll be done with these two quickly enough. Let's end this promptly. Rather than facing my opponents in succession, I will take on both at once."

"You're really doing this, huh?" Cater asked.

"Kay, guess we could leave you an excuse for when we wipe the floor with you," Ace said, and glanced at Yuya out of the corner of his eye.

If it was two against one, then they could join forces like they had at the Enchanted Mind. Deuce would first stop Riddle in his tracks, which would allow them to cut off access to that signature spell of his. Then they could figure out the rest of it. This was one of the plans they'd come up with at Ramshackle Dorm. When Ace and Deuce had started fighting about who would fight when, Yuya had eventually suggested a strategy meeting. He had also been the one to convince them that they didn't have a chance of winning unless they worked together. As a result, he was now just as much a part of this duel as they were.

The headmage brandished a small mirror, and a cheer went up from the crowd. The strange exultation hanging in the air was frightening, and Yuya wanted to run away immediately.

Now, the duel would begin.

"I will throw this mirror to the ground. When it shatters, that is your signal to begin. You are ready, yes?" Crowley asked, making eye contact

with the combatants.

The mirror reflected the grim faces of Ace and Deuce, then Riddle's smirk, and next the sky.

Yuya clasped his hands, weaving his fingers together. He squeezed so hard that his nails bit into the backs of his hands.

"Ready ..." The headmage flicked his wrist, and the mirror danced up into the air. Then it hit the ground and shattered into countless tiny pieces.

The flying fragments each caught the light of the sun. Glimmering bits danced through space, and these lights fell to the ground once again.

A voice cried out, "*Off with Your Head!*"

They didn't even get the chance to blink. It all happened in the most fleeting of moments. Ace and Deuce held up their magical pens, but before they could cast their spells, collars snapped shut around their necks.

"That's the end of that, then," Riddle announced coldly, and Yuya felt real terror at the sight of him. To think that he was actually this overwhelming. Was he really *this* powerful, this small boy before his eyes, only a year older than he was?

Ace and Deuce also reached hesitant fingers up to their necks, as though they couldn't believe what had just happened.

"For real? I didn't even have time to finish my spell!" Ace cried.

"H-he shut us down like it was nothing," Deuce groaned, staggering back.

"Myah ... They didn't stand a chance," Grim said, stunned.

"Impressive," the headmage said admiringly from where he was watching over the duel near Yuya and Grim. "Visualization is the key to spell casting. The better you are at accurately visualizing your magic's effects, the stronger and more precise it will be. It would appear that Mr. Rosehearts's powers of imagination have grown stronger since last year's duel. Such a thing does not happen overnight. It's quite obvious how much effort he puts into training day in and day out."

"Hey, you jerk!" Ace snarled. "What're you so happy for? Whose side are you on, anyway?!"

"I am on no one's side," Crowley sniffed indignantly. "I am the headmage. I referee with impartiality! But it does seem as though the contest has been decided."

When Yuya looked up with a gasp, Riddle was holding his golden scepter out, pointing it at Ace and Deuce. They took one step toward him, then another back, and then stumbled and fell.

Riddle looked down at them and chuckled. “You didn’t even last five seconds. That was all you had, and still you thought to challenge me. You must be utterly humiliated.”

Now that Ace and Deuce could not use magic, Riddle’s victory was essentially a done deal. Even if the pair didn’t accept their defeat, the moment Riddle insisted on it, the duel would end. But the anger in Riddle’s eyes continued to burn undiminished. In fact, it had grown stronger than it had been before the duel. The excitement of battle and the joy of victory became fuel and set fire to Riddle’s cruel desire to torture the pair.

“Now, admit it before everyone here,” he demanded. “You were both wrong! If you weep and apologize and accept your punishment like good little boys, I may be inclined to forgive you.”

“Not a chance!” Ace snarled.

“Losers must submit to their defeat.” Riddle glared at him. “You are weak. You have no other choice. And yet you still presume to kick and scream? Fruitless. How utterly foolish. A man who cannot follow rules is a man who cannot achieve anything. It’s just as Mother said,” he murmured, absently.

“You’re wrong,” Deuce exclaimed, leaping to his feet. “We agree that rules should be followed. But isn’t that because they’re necessary to make sure people do the right thing? Forcing others to follow nonsensical rules is tyranny!”

Seeing his brave, dazzling, and proud form, Yuya reflexively covered his face with his hands. He didn’t need to look to know that Riddle would be incandescent with rage.

“If you break the rules, you will be punished,” Riddle declared. “And in this dorm, I am the housewarden! I am the strongest! I *am* the rules! Therefore, those who cannot abide by my decisions deserve not the heads they use to complain. You must understand this! Isn’t that right, everyone?”

“Yes, Housewarden!” Voices came from students all around the garden.

Looking through the gap in his fingers, Yuya watched Riddle brandish his scepter and urge on the students. At his feet, Ace clutched the grass, and Deuce was yelling something.

Like a chorus, the other students called out, “We salute you, Housewarden Riddle!” The intense pressure of the power emanating from the housewarden tore at Ace and Deuce. The uniformity of the chorus was in a certain sense crueler magic than anything unleashed during the duel. “We salute you, Housewarden Riddle!” they continued to chorus.

No one could stop them. Trey and Cater would no doubt maintain their quiet observation to the end. In which case, until Ace and Deuce admitted that they had lost, or maybe even after they yielded, this violence would continue. On and on and on into the future. This absurd fight would never end.



When Yuya lowered the hands that had been pressed to his face, he could see Grim punching at the air near his waist. He had no doubt been fighting mad this whole time, while Yuya wrestled with his own feelings, and this free-spirited, steadfast monster gave him the final push he needed.

Perhaps noticing something different in Yuya's attitude, Grim stopped moving, a dubious look crossing his face. "Yu? Where ya goin'? Hey!"

Yuya watched his own feet take one step after another like he was in a dream. "Please stop," he said.

"Yu?!"

He parted the crowd of students and walked to the front, where Ace's and Deuce's eyes flew open so wide that their eyeballs nearly fell out. Yuya himself couldn't believe what he was doing either, so Ace and Deuce had likely never in their wildest dreams expected to see Yuya talk back to Riddle.

Riddle's eyes shone. Now that he had punished Ace and Deuce, he seemed convinced that there wasn't a person in the world who would dare disobey him now. He asked, "Do you intend to play the ally to these two fools? All of you losers, you've gotten quite friendly, hm? But since you're a student at this academy, it would be better for your sake if you paid me the respect I am due."

A breeze caressed his cheeks. The golden scepter cut through the air and shone sharply in the evening sun. "You understand, yes? *I* am correct," Riddle commanded.

"I'm not trying to be anyone's ally," Yuya said, his voice hoarse with nerves.

With an annoyed air, Riddle cupped his small ear pointedly toward Yuya.

Yuya swallowed hard to wet his throat. "Sorry. But I don't care who's right. I just really want all the fighting to stop!"

Was it so simple as that? This was somehow anticlimactic. Was it actually that basic? He didn't hate people criticizing him; he hated the fighting itself. Although at first glance, they seemed the same, there was a big difference between the two. But he'd gotten so far up in his own head that at some point he'd stopped knowing that. He didn't have Ace's

strength, Deuce's honesty, or Riddle's diligence, so he couldn't even begin to say who was right here. Anyway, he didn't think he was the person to do that.

He finally understood now. His desire to be Ace's ally was probably overreaching. Even just doing what he wanted to do, like Ace said he should, was still more than he could manage. As for loftier goals, well, it was better not to think about things that were beyond his reach.

He would do what he wanted to do. He would say exactly what he wanted to say.

"The contest's already been decided," he said, closing his eyes to shut out everything else. "In your favor, Riddle. So I think there's no point in any more fighting." When he opened his eyes, Riddle looked shocked to his very core.

"Does this look like a fight to you?" His stunned expression began to color with anger again, and when next he spoke, half-spitting the words, his tone remained somehow still elegant. "Absurd. This is *punishment*. It is the natural recompense for those who do not obey the rules! If there were no penalties, no one would follow the rules. I have to wonder what sort of pitiful education left you unable to comprehend so simple a concept. This world or what have you that you're from must have been quite vulgar indeed."

At some point, Ace and Deuce had come to Yuya's side, and now they cried out on his behalf. "What'd you say?!"

Riddle turned his contemptuous gaze on them. "And as for you two. Clearly, you were born to parents with no great magical capability. And as a result, you lack even the basic education necessary to attend a school such as this. In truth, I pity you."

All the color drained from Deuce's face, and he raised his fists before him, growling, "You little—"

"Stop!" Yuya exclaimed as he pushed down Deuce's arms with both hands. He knew that Deuce had come to Night Raven College for the sake of his mother, so this was an unforgivable insult.

But if Deuce gave himself over to anger, then any fair argument he might have had would become simple violence, and if he attacked Riddle under the watchful eyes of the headmage, not only would he not be able to

go back to the dorm, but he might end up getting expelled from the school itself. Yuya was certain Deuce would regret that.

“If you lay a finger on him—” Yuya was trying to reason with him when he saw something shoot by at top speed out of the corner of his eye.

“You shut your spoiled little mouth!” Ace roared angrily.

At the same time, Riddle fell to the ground.

“Huh?” Yuya gasped.

Ace panted heavily, while at his feet, Riddle pressed a hand to his cheek. His large eyes grew even wider, almost seeming to fall out of his head. The look on his face was stunned and somehow childlike. Beneath his hand, the pale peach of his cheek grew redder and redder.

Yuya and Deuce both stared, their jaws dropping open in shock. The rest of the assembled student body were doing the same. Had they actually seen what they thought they had? Or was this a dream?

“Myah ha ha!” Grim’s laughter echoed through the silent garden as he cockily strolled over to Ace. “Bam! Right across the face!”

The first student from the crowd to come back to himself pointed at Ace and shrieked, “H-he ... he punched the ... the housewarden!”

“Ace, you ... !” Deuce grabbed Ace’s shoulders as the garden erupted around them.

“I’m fine,” Ace said, brushing his hands off. He glared at Riddle as if the chaos and Deuce’s confusion had nothing to do with him. “That’s all I can take. Forget Riddle. Forget the duel. I’m done.”

“Riddle!” Trey and Cater cried as they raced over to him. Yuya could also see the headmage heading their way.

As for Riddle, his hand was still pressed to his cheek in blank amazement. “Ow. You ... p-punched me?” he asked, his voice trembling with disbelief.

“Stop yammering about parents already. Kids aren’t trophies for their parents to flaunt. And the way a kid turns out doesn’t determine the value of their parents. That’s not where the problem is.” Ace pointed at Riddle and shouted, “I toooo-tally get it now! It’s not your parents’ fault you became a tyrant, or anyone else’s. You’ve been here for a year and haven’t even made one friend who’ll tell you when you’re outta line. And that’s on *you*.”

“Me?” Riddle’s eyes quavered. “What ... are you talking about?”

“Fine, so you grew up with a relentless helicopter mom who totally did not make it fun. But, like, is that all you are? Just an extension of your mom?!”

“My mom? How do you know—” Riddle gasped. “Trey!” He no doubt thought he had been betrayed by an old friend. “What have you been telling him about me? You can’t possibly be rejecting Mother and her teachings?!”

“No, that’s not it, Riddle,” Trey pleaded as Riddle yanked him forward by his lapels. “I just thought, maybe if they could understand you, then ...”

“And there you go again. It’s aaaaalways someone else’s fault with you, huh?” Ace sneered at Riddle. “You talk like you’re holier than thou, but you can’t even think for yourself. You call yourself a housewarden? ‘The red sovereign’? You’re just a big baby who’s good at magic!”

“*Baby*? Did you just call me a baby?” Riddle staggered to his feet as if pulled by an invisible thread and glared at Ace. “How dare you! You don’t know anything. You don’t know the first thing about me!”

“Nope, sure don’t. How could I?” Ace demanded. “I mean, have you ever let *anyone* know you? That’s how you make friends, dude. But you don’t bother to put in the work. You just expect everyone to wait on you hand and foot. You’re nothing but a spoiled brat!”

“Shut up. Shut. Up. Shut up! Shut your mouth!” Riddle stomped his foot against the ground in frustration, his face beet red. His usual refined demeanor was suddenly nowhere to be seen. He looked exactly like what Ace had called him—the very picture of an infant who hadn’t yet learned to speak.

“He’s scaring me,” Grim whispered, and Deuce nodded. It was absurd that Riddle would kick and flail his small body in a temper tantrum. It made them keenly aware of the dangerous fact that Riddle knew no other way of doing things.

The students in the crowd were whispering to each other as they watched Riddle lose his usual composure. This was the red sovereign they had so feared. The tyrant with magical power so absolute that all bowed before him. That authority was gone now, the beautiful cloak was covered in dirt, and the crown on his head listed heavily to one side. Was the ruler whom they had cowered before nothing more than this boring, pathetic baby?

“All of it is for your sakes. Mother was right! And that means I’m right, too!” Riddle shouted. This was quickly followed by a smugly pleasing *crack*.

“Ugh!” Riddle scowled as something oozed onto his cheek. A viscous liquid wove through his red hair and flowed downward. “What is this? Blood?” He reached a hand up to his face, and Trey and the headmage both started in surprise.

At first, Yuya also wondered if it was blood. But what appeared on Riddle’s glove, dripping from his fingers, was clear and thicker than blood.

Riddle turned his head upward, and a yellow lump slid down around his eye. This melted away, becoming shapeless, and slid across his smooth cheek, dribbling down onto his jaw. Drops of yellow fell onto the grass.

“Egg ...” Trey murmured.

Yuya looked closely and noticed eggshell in Riddle’s hair. The egg had been crushed, its contents scattered, dirtying the crown.

“Who’s housewarden now?!” a voice shouted from somewhere in the garden. “Forcing your selfish rules on us!”

“Yeah!” someone else agreed.

“We have to live in fear because of you!”

“The new kid’s right. Who cares what you’ve been through? I’m sick of this!”

A hand in the crowd waved a magical pen, and another egg went flying toward Riddle. This time, Trey repelled it with a spell.

“Stop it!” he yelled. “What are you doing? This is your housewarden!”

“Calm down, guys!” Cater called out to the students desperately, but the cork couldn’t be put back in the bottle. All the resentment and anger that had been kept in check by the threat of Riddle erupted, like a powder keg being lit.

“You’re no housewarden!” a student yelled.

“Go home, you baby!” chanted another.

A storm of jeers rose from the crowd.

“Come now! I insist that you cease this behavior!” the headmage shouted, waving his hands above his head. “When I say stop, I mean stop! Can you not hear my voice?!”

There was the sound of another egg splatting across the green lawn. Someone stepped on it, which made a disgusting squelching sound. Curses. Sneers. Shouts. The garden was lawless in the afternoon sun.



“This is awful,” Yuya murmured to himself, and Deuce clicked his tongue in disapproval.

“Where were they when Riddle was taking our heads off? It was all, ‘We salute you, Housewarden,’ then. But Ace throws a punch, and they revolt?” Deuce asked.

With this many people clamoring, there was no way of knowing who had thrown the eggs. This anonymity only fanned the violence. Yuya felt a shiver run up his spine, and Ace pursed his lips together unhappily. He had undoubtedly not intended for this to happen when he’d fought back against Riddle.

Yuya looked toward the housewarden. Trey and Cater were by his side, whispering urgently to him. Abruptly, Riddle doubled over and began shaking.

“Heh heh ... Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha! Ah ha ha ha ha!” Riddle clutched his stomach as he laughed. “Heh heh! Ah ha ha! Aah, it’s so funny ... *You’re fed up? I’m the one who’s fed up with all of you!*”

He wiped the egg off his jaw with a thumb. “No matter how strict I am, no matter how many heads I remove, you keep breaking the rules. All of you, you’re nothing but selfish idiots!” Riddle wasn’t looking at anyone anymore. Eyes unfocused, lips twisted up, he brandished the scepter with the magestone on top. “Fine. If that’s what you want ... I’ll pass judgment on all of you!”

Light flashed, and cries rose up. Students dropped to the ground, brand-new collars around their necks. One boy was cut down by a streak of light as he turned and tried to run. Before their eyes, one student after another fell to Riddle’s fetters.

“How do you like that, hm?” Riddle sneered. “Now no one can do a thing to me. Do you see now? My strict adherence to the rules was clearly the correct path!”

“Cease this improper behavior now, Mr. Rosehearts. I expect better from you!” The headmage repelled the magic that came flying at Trey. “What happened to the rules that you have always so respected?”

Riddle’s spell was now attacking people indiscriminately. He watched the students running around in confusion, quite obviously enjoying

himself. The words of the headmage were drowned out by his peals of laughter.

“He’s lost the plot!” Grim shouted as he climbed up Yuya’s back to his shoulders to escape being kicked around in the chaos. “This could get ugly, fast! We gotta vamoose, like now!”

“Nope,” Ace said, and leaped out in front of Riddle. “Hey, man! Snap out of it!”

When Riddle saw Ace, the smile vanished from his face. Crowley tried to stop him, Deuce and Yuya called out to him, but still, Ace did not retreat.

“Wow, way to totally prove me wrong here. I call you a baby, and you immediately throw a temper tantrum?” Ace taunted.

“Retract your comment immediately,” Riddle demanded furiously. “Or I shall skewer you where you stand!”

“No way. I ain’t retractin’ squat.” Ace didn’t flinch, of course. He wasn’t afraid of Riddle like the other students in the dorm, and he didn’t pander to him like Trey and Cater. Even after having his head taken off multiple times, he still refused to go along with what he knew to be wrong. Which was exactly why he was so vexing to Riddle.

“Yeeeeaaaaaargh!” Riddle shrieked, boiling with rage. The ground beneath his feet began to shake.

At first, Yuya thought it was his own legs trembling in fear, but when he looked around, everyone else was also staring at their feet. The shaking increased, and the earth rumbled and roared.

“Trey,” Cater said as the color drained from his face. “This is for real triple yikes. Seriously.”

The ground began to crack as the roots of the rose bushes pulled free of the dirt. Clouds of dust followed the bushes up into the air, and the roots of an enormous rose bush undulated and twisted together, the tips sharpened like lances. All of them were aimed at Ace.

“Mighty roses, tear this brute to pieces!” Riddle howled.

“No way ... Ah! Ace!” Deuce tried to run over to him, but the cracking ground blocked his way.

Yuya reached out toward Ace, straining desperately, but he was much too far away to reach him. “Ace!” he cried.

As the pointed roots of the rose bush surrounded him, Ace covered his face with his arms.

Yuya was on the verge of squeezing his eyes shut, when someone came running over to Ace from the opposite direction.

“Paint the Roses!” came a shout.

The roar of angry earth quieted, replaced by a gentle fluttering. Yuya stared at Trey, who stood in front of Ace, who was crouched on the ground. Paper was scattered around them.

“Huh? I-I ... I’m still alive?” Ace picked up one of the palm-sized cards curiously. It was an utterly ordinary heart suit. “Is this a playing card? Why?”

“The rose tree turned into playing cards?” Deuce stared with wide eyes, and there was a *clack* from his neck. The lock on the collar had opened. Stunned, he pulled the collar off, and it melted into the air. The same thing happened to Ace, Grim, and all the other dorm students.

“Was that your Paint the Roses spell just now, Trey?” Cater asked, incredulous. “And everyone’s collars came off. How the ... ? Huh? What’s going on?”

“I told you. My magic can overwrite characteristics for a short time.” Trey paused for breath. “So I used it to make Riddle’s magic into my magic.”

“What?!” Cater cried. “No way. You can do that? That’s some kinda loophole!”



The entire group was stunned into silence, but Riddle alone seemed to be unable to accept what was happening.

“*Off with Your Head!*” he yelled. “*Off with Your Head! Off!* I said, *Off!*” But the only thing he accomplished by waving of his scepter was to scatter more cards on the ground. “Why ... why can I only produce cards?”

“Riddle, you have to stop!” Trey called out to him, while still protecting Ace behind him. “Can’t you see how you look right now? You keep going like this, and you’ll end up more and more alone. Look around ... Look at their faces!”

The overturned earth of the lawn. The cruelly scattered roses. The dorm students staring at him, astonished.

“He was really gonna take out that first-year ...”

“He’s completely out of control.”

The terror bleeding into their faces was uglier than the fear that had been there before, and it even contained a note of scorn.

“You overwrote my magic, Trey? Does this mean your signature spell is stronger than mine?” Perhaps Riddle hadn’t noticed the way the students were despairing, or maybe he hadn’t cared. All that concerned him was his own magic. The look on his face could even have been described as innocent. Maybe he didn’t understand what he had tried to do to Ace. “I lost to *your* magic, Trey? Then ... So then I ... I’m ...”

“Of course not, Riddle. You should know better than anyone how amazing you are. Take a deep breath and listen to me.” Trey reached a gentle hand out toward his shoulder, but Riddle jerked away.

“No!” He twisted his face up into a scowl. “Are *you* going to tell me that I’m wrong, too, Trey? After all I’ve done to protect the rule of law?! Do you know how much I’ve suffered for this?!”

His shriek was such that Yuya wondered if it would send all the scattered playing cards flying. He covered his face with his hands, as if trying to hide eyes that threatened to fill with tears. “I ... I refuse to believe this ...” Riddle grumbled.

His scepter dropped to the ground.

“Is that ...” Ace’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Is that *blot*?”

The shining red magestone was now darkly muddied.

Yuya recalled the headmage's words from the previous day. First, the magestone would be dyed black. Next, the blot would linger in the mage's body, until it eventually spilled out. When it got to that point... What *did* happen when it got to that point?

Riddle was rubbing his face and muttering something. Perhaps the effect of Trey's spell had run out, as the rose bushes suddenly reappeared.

"Cease this immediately, Mr. Rosehearts!" the headmage shouted. "Any further attempt to use magic will leave your magestone completely tainted with blot!"

The headmage's warning echoed in Yuya's ears: "*This you must avoid at all costs. The very lives of the mage and the people in the vicinity are in danger in such a situation.*"

Still hiding his face in his hands, Riddle shouted loudly enough to almost rip his throat open, "But ... I'm right! *I'm* the one who's right! There is no possible alternative!"

"Riddle!" Trey shouted. Before his eyes, the last sliver of red light disappeared from Riddle's magestone.

Darkness seethed inside the black stone. For a fleeting moment, there was an almost impossible silence, and then the change came.

Plsh.

Something dripped from Riddle's hanging head.

Plsh, plsh. Plsh, plsh, plsh, plsh.

Black liquid oozed from his red hair and spread out in a stain at his feet.

The moment he saw this black pool, everything came together in Yuya's mind. There was no mistake. This was the same sediment they'd seen in the Enchanted Mine. Blot. The residue generated as the price for magic.

Riddle turned his small face forward lifelessly, and Yuya gasped. It was filthy with blot, which dripped down from his forehead, like some kind of bizarre mask. The glistening black liquid seeped into his body through his eyes, his nose, his mouth. Yuya could see his slender neck steadily dyed black from the inside.

The blot dripped onto his white uniform, transforming it into a repulsive mess of ooze. As the dripping liquid dried up from the edges, it left in its wake a tattered ball gown. The blot crawled across Riddle's skin, becoming boots, gloves, and a crown, resembling the garb of a queen.

The group assembled on the lawn stared, stunned at this transformation, and Riddle grinned at them, now clad in his wetly black ornamentation.

“Everyone, get back!” Crowley yelled.

The blot continued to pour from the vessel that was Riddle, and then it erupted, scattering in all directions. Yuya protected his face from the black droplets with his arms, and in that moment, he saw a massive lump peel away from Riddle’s back and fall to the ground. It twitched and pulsed, and then began to crawl slowly, ever so slowly.

“What is that ... ?” Trey asked as he took a fearful step back.

“Hey ...” Ace shouted and shuddered, like he couldn’t believe what he was looking at. “Whoa! That’s ... Isn’t that the monster from the Enchanted Mine?!”

The enormous newborn mass pulled itself up and resolved into a creature so large Yuya had to tilt his neck back to look up at its ink-bottle head. It really did look a lot like the monster that had attacked them in the Enchanted Mine.

But this creature now, standing behind Riddle, seemed to be much bigger, maybe because of the torn piece of fabric that billowed out voluminously from its waist. Its queenly outfit was a near-perfect match with the transformed Riddle’s costume.

“Wait. It’s like ... I feel like its head’s a different shape, though.” Deuce said, pointing at the ink bottle. Although it was made of the same glass as the head of the monster from the mine, the head of the creature before them was in the shape of a heart, rather than a circle. The same inky black fluid sloshed inside of it, though. It all made sense to Yuya now. The head contained blot. It leaked out through cracks in the glass and splattered the torn-up lawn.

The creature was so hideous that Yuya could hardly bear to look at it, and yet Riddle seemed to lean toward it.

“You are fools to defy me! You are not welcome in my world.” It was no longer Riddle’s voice he heard. It wasn’t even a human voice. The entity had no apparent gender. Sinister, with several layers of warped sound, the voice came from black lips. “In *my* world, *I* am the law. I am order made manifest! The only response I will accept from you is ‘Yes, Housewarden Riddle.’ All who defy me will lose their heads!”

His slim figure floated up into the air. The blot dripping from Riddle's arms led to the monster behind him, which was raising him up toward the sky as if presenting a newborn baby.

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha! Bwah ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Riddle laughed, his head swinging back and forth hard enough to nearly break his neck, and his right eye flashed with a fiery red gleam. The light blazed like flames before vanishing, and it made Yuya itch with uneasiness for some reason.

The creature ripped a nearby rose bush out of the ground with terrifying ease and swung it like a scythe to mow them all down. The headmage quickly held up his scepter to cast a spell, and a veillike film appeared, with him in the center, protecting Yuya and the others from the knifelike leaves of the bush.

"Dear me, what have I done?" Crowley said as his lips trembled. "I've allowed a student to overblot in my presence!"

Overblot, blot overflowing—this was the situation that was meant to be avoided at all costs.

What would happen to Riddle? Yuya asked if anyone knew, but Deuce, Grim, and Ace all shook their heads, their faces pale.

"Is the monster—the housewarden's transformation—is all of it because of blot?" Deuce asked, and the headmage assented vaguely. "Most likely."

"Most likely?!" Grim turned his eyes up at him. "We've got this seriously freaky monster here, and this guy's got nothin'! And that grouch is an even bigger grouch now! He was firin' off spells at me over there, laughin' like a hyena the whole time! What's going on?!"

"To put it in layman's terms, he's in evil berserker mode!" Cater explained to the confused group.

The headmage nodded. "At the moment, Rosehearts is overcome by negative energy and has lost control of his emotions, as well as his magic. We must restore his consciousness before he exhausts his magical energy. Otherwise, lives will be lost—"

The roar of the beast and the shrieks of the students drowned out the headmage. Riddle had shifted his ire from Yuya and the other students directly in front of him to students farther away.

Crowley threw a protective spell their way. "The well-being of my students is my top priority!" he shouted. "I must evacuate them

immediately. I need all of you to seek assistance from the other instructors and houseward—”

“Hiiiyah! Take that!” Ace’s yell interrupted the headmage. The wind magic he unleashed scattered the petals of the rose bush in the monster’s grip.

“I summon thee, cauldron!” Deuce shouted.

“Myaaaaah!” Grim howled.

When Riddle dodged Deuce’s enormous cauldron, Grim hit him with fire. Riddle glared at them as he brushed aside the flying fireball with one hand. Despite how easily the housewarden had evaded their spells, Deuce and Grim stayed low in their fighting stances, ready to launch their next blows.

“Hey, hey, hey, what are you guys doing?!” Cater grabbed Grim and yanked him up. His tone was uncharacteristically rough in his surprise. “Didn’t you hear the headmage? He said to go and get the teachers and the other housewardens.”

“But if we just leave Housewarden Rosehearts ...” Deuce shook his head, firmly. “We need to stop him now. I don’t want this on my conscience.”

“Deuce’s right on the money. I ain’t letting my start as a great magician be ruined by a mess like this. And ...” Ace gripped his magical pen tightly, laser focused on Riddle. “I’m not givin’ up till I hear him say ‘I was wrong and I’m sorry’!”

The three of them boldly faced Riddle. Cater and the headmage were speechless at the sight, their expressions a mix of exasperation, admiration, and surprise. These students had only just started at the academy—first-years who had no real magic to speak of, and yet they held their heads high and stood strong in the face of such danger.

At first, Trey was equally baffled, but then he followed Ace’s gaze and squared his shoulders. He squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them again, they were fiercely determined. “All right. Let’s do this,” he said.

“Trey?!” Cater yelped.

Trey pulled his magical pen out of the interior pocket of his jacket. “I can overwrite his magic for a little longer. In the meantime, do what you can! Headmage, please evacuate the other students.”

“Wait right there,” Crowley said. “This is simply too dangerous.”

“Yes! That! I can’t believe even *you’re* talking like this, Trey,” Cater cried, more desperate than the headmage in his attempt to stop Trey. As someone who’d witnessed Riddle’s power up close and personal while standing by his side for the last year, he was only too aware of the danger Riddle posed. “You can’t beat him! Not to mention, he’s overblotted, mokay? Forget taking your head. He’ll *crush* you!”

“We can’t beat him. So what?” Ace declared, showing no sign of retreating. “You’re not even gonna fight unless you *know* you can win?”

“That’s weak!” Grim agreed.

“The weakest.” Deuce nodded in agreement with Ace and Grim, and looked back at Riddle. “Plus, the way he’s going ... I have a hard time believing the housewarden’s magic’ll hold out until the teachers get here.”

Riddle called forth a gust of wind that propelled the rose leaves up into a hurricane. They burned a brilliant red as they whipped through the air. Blocks of ice that had been trapping students’ feet melted, creating clouds of steam obstructing the view of the garden. Riddle seemed to be casting spells entirely at random.

“All of you! Bow down to me! Kneel!” he shrieked, blot scattering from his lips.

“We have to do something to stop him,” Trey said. “I don’t want to lose him. I ... There’re too many things I’ve left unsaid.”

“Are the four of you even serious? This is for real bonkers.” Cater begged and sought out Yuya with his eyes, pleading for help with a desperate look on his face. “Right, Yuey? You think so, too, yeah?”

He no doubt thought Yuya would agree with him since he’d witnessed how the first-year from another world had done nothing but cower before Riddle. And it was true—if Yuya thought about it with a cool head, fighting Riddle when he had lost all reason was a dangerous bet.

He didn’t *want* Ace, Deuce, or Grim to put themselves in danger, but he already knew only too well that they were not the type to obediently follow orders and warnings. In which case, Yuya could ask only one thing of them.

“I really ... don’t like fighting,” he said.

“Right?” Cater’s face brightened. “Totes! Me too. You bet. So—”

“So let’s end this as fast as we can, Cater!”

“H-huh? *That’s* what you think?!” Cater opened and closed his mouth a few times, a troubled look on his face. But when he realized that neither Trey nor Yuya was going to yield, he turned his head up to the heavens in resignation. “Aaaah! Whyyyyy?!”

He ran his hands through his hair in frustration before growling, “Fine! I get it! I can’t just abandon you. I’ll help. But I need you to know this is very not me, okay!”

“Sorry, Cater.” Trey smiled. “Thanks.”

“What for? I mean, anyone can see this isn’t just your problem, Trey.” Cater pulled his mussed hair back into a neat ponytail and winked. “And I am 100 percent the perfect person to soothe our little savage beast! ♪”

“Well, I’m sold!” Ace laughed.

The headmage sighed at length. “Why are all the students at our beloved academy so fiercely hot-blooded? I will return as soon as I have evacuated the students to safety. Stand firm until then. It simply would not do to have a series of overblots, now, would it? You must ensure that you do not overexert yourselves. Understood?!”

“Understood,” Trey said, an obedient look on his face. When he turned his magical pen on Riddle, the housewarden’s face twisted up.

“Such defiance, from every last one of you! I shall take all of your heads!” He waved his hand, and the monster swung the giant rose bush.

Now that the headmage was gone, Yuya was exposed to a gale so intense he could barely put one foot in front of the other. He wasn’t alone, as Grim’s tiny body nearly flew up into the sky. They huddled together and waited out the storm behind a half-destroyed hedge.

“How do you get a guy who’s overblotted to go back to normal?” Ace yelled at Trey, undaunted by the flying grit.

Trey shook his head slowly. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“You don’t know?!” Ace cried while Cater rolled his eyes.

“So you really haven’t thought this through at all,” Cater commented.

“I mean, all I know is what they taught us in history class,” Trey said. “I heard there aren’t even that many actual cases of it happening to begin with. How am I supposed to know how to fix this?!”

Their protective hedge suddenly turned to ice, and the branches shattered into a million pieces as a piercing light flew at their necks.

Riddle's magic was as sharp as ever. It had actually increased in strength as he howled for everything outside of himself to obey.

Trey dropped to the ground and rolled aside, turning the spell into playing cards just as they were all on the verge of being collared.

"Unnnngaaaaah!" Riddle howled, furious, and the scattering cards caught fire. Each time he shouted, the creature sent drops of blot flying outward, as if in response. The expanding stains were so black they looked like holes to the center of the earth, and just the sight of them sent a cold shiver up Yuya's spine.

The roses still attached to the bush in the creature's grip appeared to be pulsing. Or was the terror of being under attack like this making Yuya hallucinate?

"Ugh." Cater grimaced. "If we keep playing defense here, we're just gonna make Riddle use up his magic faster."

"Yeah." Trey nodded fiercely. "We have to do something."

Before them, Riddle was so pale he looked like he might collapse at any second. He curled his lips up into something that might have been a smile. "I ... I'm ... I am—!" he began.

He shuddered violently, and the monster wrapped itself around him from behind, as if in an embrace. The black liquid that spilled from the ink bottle wet his face. "Yes. I am abso-lutely, positively right. *I* am the law in this world!" Riddle declared.

Immersed in the repulsive blot, Riddle smiled as if at peace. Yuya couldn't help but feel that the creature was absorbing Riddle's mind.

Blot stretched out like an umbilical cord to connect Riddle and the monster. Riddle waved his arms; the monster waved its arms. The monster threw its head back; Riddle threw his head back. Yuya couldn't tell which of them had moved first.

"Can we pull that monster behind him away from Riddle?" he asked quietly.

Trey had apparently been thinking the same thing. "Yeah. Seems like a good bet to peel that thing off him, huh?"

They all nodded firmly and sprang into action. Trey defended against Riddle's magic, while Cater and Yuya drew Riddle's attention using Cater's signature spell. With that opening, Ace, Deuce, and Grim threw everything they had at the monster.

“Take that, you ding-dong!” Ace shouted as he launched a gust of wind at the monster’s chest. The ball of air bounced back and carved out a hollow cavity in its torso, but vines and leaves rushed up to fill the hole, forming a disturbingly swollen mass of green. The lump twisted, writhed, dripped, and twitched like it had a mind of its own.

If they couldn’t blow it away, then they would wash it off. With the image of a stormy river in his mind, Deuce unleashed a torrent on the same spot. The black liquid grew slightly thinner and stretched out loosely. But the drops that fell to the ground were still moving. Grim lobbed fireballs at them until they finally disappeared with a sizzling sound.

“Grrraaaaaaaaarrr!” the monster roared, loud enough to shake the earth itself.

Riddle also groaned through his connection with it, a pained grimace on his face.

“Why? Why? Why does everyone get in my way?” he asked as tears filled his eyes. He grabbed the arm of a nearby Cater avatar and clung to him desperately, pleadingly, shaking all over. “I’m right! I *have* to be. Otherwise, what was any of it for ... ?”

“Riddle ...” Cater said.

The Cater beside Yuya disappeared, and only the real one remained, held captive by Riddle. The blot oozing from Riddle’s fingertips crackled as it devoured his shoulder.

“Unh!” Cater cried and twisted away.

But the desperate Riddle cleaved to him with a force that seemed impossible for his slender form, and try as he might, Cater couldn’t pull free.

Throwing Ace off, the monster whipped the rose bush up into the air. The petals of the flowers were almost entirely scattered, and the sullied corpses of roses still clinging to the branches shone like they were on fire.

A split second before the massive bush hit Cater’s head, Trey shrieked, “*Paint the Roses!*” The rose bush was overwritten with a pack of cards. “Riddle! Stop!” Trey shouted as he pushed the housewarden’s hands off Cater. They were black with magic and pointed into claws that shivered at Trey’s touch.

Riddle gazed up at him, lost. “Why, Trey? I made sure to follow the rules,” he asked.

“But you don’t have to. I ... I should have told you that a long, long time ago.” Trey faced Riddle, his voice trembling. “It’s my fault. Which is why I have to stop you.”

But Riddle seemed to no longer be hearing Trey’s voice. Cater’s complaints, Ace’s battle cry, Deuce’s shout, Grim’s roar, Yuya’s call—he heard none of them. He shrank back almost pitifully, turning to someone who wasn’t there.

“I ... was wrong? But that’s ... impossible. Isn’t it ... Mother?”



MOM WAS ALWAYS RIGHT.

“Happy eighth birthday, Riddle,” she said.

Every year, on my birthday, she gave me a cake specially made to make me healthier. As she placed my birthday cake in front of me, she said, “This year’s birthday cake is a low-sugar recipe made with nuts and lecithin-rich soy flour to improve your cerebral function.”

“Thank you,” I said, and she smiled.

Mom always says that everything she did was for my sake. That she was only thinking of me when she said things like that. That it was all for me. For my sake.

She loves me the most out of anyone in the whole world. So maybe she’ll listen when I asked for something?

“But, um, I ... Just once, I wish I could try one of those tarts covered with bright red strawberries,” I asked timidly.

We always passed by a local cake shop on our Sunday walk, so I had seen the tart in the window, decorated with what looked like jewels. It seemed like a different creature from the brown cake I always got. It was almost too beautiful to be real. The way it sparkled and shone—could people really eat it? What did the fluffy cream taste like? How sweet were those strawberries on top?

I wanted to try that tart.

When I told her, Mommy suddenly started to get angry.

“Absolutely not!” she said, incensed. “Those tarts are monstrously unhealthy. I might as well feed you poison! Even just a single slice would exceed your recommended intake of sugar for a whole day. And taking in all that sugar at once won’t do you a lick of good. That is *not* something you should be eating.”

I loved my mommy. She was always right, all the time. If she said so, then it had to be true.

“Now, dinner tonight will be a healthy tuna sauté rich in DHA and omega-3 fatty acids. Aah, but ... What is the recommended caloric intake for a single meal for an eight-year-old child?” she asked me.

“Six hundred kilocalories, Mom,” I responded dutifully.

“Correct. So you mustn’t eat more than a hundred grams. Understood?”

“Yes.” When I nodded, Mommy told me what a good boy I was. I didn’t need anything else.

I never talked about strawberry tarts again.

“That’s enough classical magic study for today,” Mother said and held out a classic text about magical ethics. On the first page of the thick volume was the famous dedication, “To all the mages.” At the time, I was several years into my education as a mage, and I could read the books grown-up mages read. “Read up to chapter 3 before tomorrow and summarize the reading in less than a thousand words. Now, you may have one hour of independent study.”

“Thank you, Mother,” I said dutifully.

“Excellent. I have an errand to run, so I will see you in an hour.” Mother smiled and left the room. She had a work engagement every day at this time that she abso-lutely could not miss. When she returned, we would begin the study of potionology. Until then, I would prepare for the lesson.

She had packed every academic subject into a daily schedule that ran down to the minute. If I performed well, I would be praised; if I didn’t, I would be punished. But I had no complaints. After all, Mother was always right, so if she said it was important, then it must be. This was my “normal.” Days of what was right, without any deviation.

What brought it all tumbling down was a faint sound against the window.

“Is someone knocking on the window?” I stood up, unlocked the window, and opened it.

There were two boys outside.

“Ah! He opened it!” a boy with green hair said, brightening with a smile. Glasses much too big for his face were pushed up by his cheeks and slid off to one side.

“Hey, come play with us!” a boy who was half-cat, with purple ears, insisted as he yanked on my hand. I was so surprised by the softness of his hand on mine that I automatically pulled back.

“Who are you?” I asked. Just saying that made my heart pound. It was the first time I’d done anything that wasn’t on the schedule.

“I’m Artemiy Artemiyevich Pinker,” the cat boy said.

“Artemiy Artemiyevich Pinker?” I repeated. “That’s a really long name.”

“Wow! I’ve never seen a kid who could say Chenya’s name after hearing it only one time!” The boy with the glasses laughed. “I’m Trey. Hey, come play croquet with us.”

“That’s ...” I shook my head. “I can’t. It’s independent study time. I have to study.”

I was sure that I had disappointed them and that they would leave. The thought made me incredibly sad, even though I was the one who had refused. I poked at the neatly cleaned rug with my toes.

“Independent study, huh? That means you get to pick what to do, right?” Chenya asked.

“Huh?” When I lifted my face, Chenya’s ears were twitching merrily.

“My grandpa always says play is a form of study!” he said.

“He’s right,” Trey insisted. “Just play with us for a little bit?”

“O-okay. Just for a little, though!” I agreed.

Carefully, I brought over a chair so I could climb out the window, making sure it didn’t make a sound dragging across the floor. My heart was leaping in my chest, pounding so loudly I was sure they could hear it. I stood up on the chair and set one foot on the ledge. Trey held out his hand.

“Hey, what’s your name?” he asked.

“R-Riddle. Riddle Rosehearts,” I respond.

That was the moment I made my first friends.

I had the best time playing with Trey and Chenya. I'd known the rules of croquet, but I'd never played it before. They were surprised when I told them that. When I said I'd never played hide-and-seek or tag either, they were even more surprised, and they played all kinds of games with me. The hour flew by in the blink of an eye.

"What's wrong, Riddle?" Trey asked. "You look like you're gonna cry. We can play again tomorrow, y'know?"

"Three's way more fun than two," Chenya told him. "And you like three better than one, yeah?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "I want to see you and Trey again tomorrow. Let's play!"

After that, I snuck out of my room every day to play with them, for just that one hour during independent study. It became our playtime.

It wasn't just croquet. They knew about lots of things I had no clue about: TV shows that were popular. The festival that was happening in the neighborhood soon. The orange kittens that had been born a couple houses over. It was all fun, but the most exciting thing was talking about sweets I'd never eaten.

"Whaaaat? You've never tried a strawberry tart, Riddle?" Chenya asked.

"Nope." I shook my head. "Mother says sugar is basically poison, so I'm not allowed."

"Well, sure, if you eat a whole one by yourself maybe." Trey got a sad look on his face, so I asked what was wrong, and he told me that his family ran a cake shop. The strawberry tart I longed for, the one sitting in the window, which I had dreamed of for so long—that was from Trey's family's shop.

"I know!" he said suddenly, in a bright voice. "Come have some right now."

"What?!" I exclaimed. Did I look that hungry? I hurriedly shook my head, but Trey grinned.

"It's super yummy," he said.

"But ... Mother ..."

"One slice isn't gonna kill you. Plus, I know Mom and Dad'd be happy if you came over, Riddle."

"Excellent idea. But I want more than just a slice—I want the whole tart!" Chenya declared.

“Okay, no.” Trey shook his head firmly. “Not happening.”

“S-so ... Are you sure?” I followed them to Trey’s house. Trey’s little brother and sister were inside. No matter how many times Trey told them to go play somewhere else, they kept chattering at me, full of curiosity. His house was so busy, his family so animated. Even the way Trey sighed with relief when they finally left seemed to be happily fond, and I thought about how different it was from my house.

I waited with Chenya in Trey’s room.

“Here you are. Go on, dig in,” Trey said as he placed a shiny, red strawberry tart on a snowy-white plate before me. When I stared, unable to believe it really existed, Trey and Chenya laughed.

“Hurry up and eat it!” Chenya insisted.

I poked it with a silver fork, and the strawberries were knocked off-balance and nearly fell off the edge. So a tart was a fragile thing. I carefully cut off a small bite and put it in my mouth.

How happy I was in that moment! I can still feel it like it was yesterday. I never get sick of replaying the memory.

A sweetness the likes of which I’d never experienced spread across my tongue. The rich cream melted inside my mouth and slid gently down my throat. The crust of the tart crumbled and broke apart at the mere touch of my teeth. The jewellike strawberries were not as sweet as they looked. When I bit into them, I was surprised at the fruit juice that spilled into my mouth. This was the real thing. Huh. So this was what it tasted like. This was what it smelled like. It was sourer than I’d imagined, and much, much more delicious. Aah, to think that something so tasty existed in this world!

“Thank you ... Trey, Chenya,” I said.

Trey grinned. “When you eat it with a look like that on your face, I almost want to be the one thanking you.”

“I get how Riddle feels. Your family’s tart are so yummy,” Chenya said.

I would never forget that day. I never wanted to forget it. I ate the tart one heavenly bite at a time, slowly, savoring it, as if in a dream.

I also forgot the passage of time.

“I cannot believe this! Not only are you cutting independent study time, but you go out and eat a mountain of sugar?!” Mom exclaimed.

Waiting for me when I hurried back to my room was Mother. She looked very scary. As soon as she saw my face through the window, she dragged me into my room, shouted at Trey and Chenya to never come back, and slammed the window shut.

Mother peppered me with questions—Who were they? How long have you known them? What were you doing? Why did you do that?—and I answered them honestly. I thought that if I lied to her any more than I had already, she would stop talking to me.

“I see. Those two hoodlums must have incited this behavior. This is exactly why you must never play with children who have barely been educated ever again!” she demanded.

“I’m sorry. I’m very sorry, Mother! I promise, it will never happen again!” I pleaded. My nose prickled, my eyes grew hot, and tears started to flow. Not because I was scared of Mother, but because the mere thought of how things would be from now on made me impossibly sad. “So please, just let me see them—”

“Be quiet! This is your fault for breaking the rules,” Mother said, and locked the window.

When I think back on it, that lock was only open for a month or two at most. I’m sure I couldn’t have hidden my bad behavior for too long. All that was left for me was what was right. At the end of my foolish act, one lesson was clear: Break the rules, and even fun will be taken from you.

That’s why I absolutely had to obey Mother’s rules.

After that, my life became much more regimented, and Mother’s gaze became even stricter. I adhered unerringly to a curriculum without independent study time. I vowed to never break Mother’s rules again. After all, she was the most accomplished mother in the city, and therefore, the most correct. Yes. My mother was always correct.

But ... Mom?

Why? Why did my heart hurt so much? I wanted to eat a tart, if only on my birthday. Why did I feel this way even though I knew it was wrong?

The truth is, I didn’t want to study all the time. I wanted to play outside all day long. *Hey, Mom, you know what? Croquet hoops are only this big. Trey and Chenya told me my shot was amazing. They said they couldn’t*

believe it was my first time playing. Aah, I wished I could see them again. I wondered what they were doing now. I hadn't even gotten to say goodbye. Maybe they'd already forgotten me. I wanted to talk about that day. I wanted loads more friends I could laugh and play with.

It hurts. I study, I obey the rules, but my heart is always hurting. It actually keeps getting worse. I try to claw it out, I try to throw it up, but the prickling pain continues. It hurts, it's so, so hard, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do about it.

Tell me, Mom. What rule do I need to follow to make this pain go away?

Riddle!

Someone's calling me.

Mom? Maybe it's Mom. I hope it is. I would be so happy if Mom called out to me like this, so gently, so desperately, so indiscreetly.

But it's not. I know it's not her.

So who is it then?



“RIDDLE! Hey, can you hear me? Riddle!” Trey called desperately, shaking the shoulders of Riddle, who lay limp on the ground.

Cater reached out to stop him. “Don’t go shaking him like that. You don’t know what’s going to shake loose. In a bad way,” he cautioned.

“But ...” Trey said.

“Mr. Diamond is correct,” said the headmage, crouched by his side. His face had been grim ever since he’d returned from evacuating the other students and they’d told him Riddle wouldn’t wake up. “Although you all did manage to stop him, the burden on Mr. Rosehearts after overblotting is unfathomable. This is the first case that I’ve seen myself, so I cannot predict its outcome ...”

All their hard work, the way they’d dug deep down to muster every bit of strength they had paid off. They’d gradually chipped away at the creature’s strength until at last it fell, and the blot connection with Riddle was ripped away.

Like a flower withering, the creature shrunk, crumbling from the extremities inward, and became skinnier before their eyes, smaller and smaller, until it dropped to the ground. Finally, it became a viscous mass and spasmed, as if seeking to continue its mission, but Ace and Deuce fired magic at it, and in the end, only the head remained.

There was an unpleasant slurping sound as the blot inside the bottle was spat out onto the lawn. Once the head was empty, countless cracks raced

along the surface of the ink bottle until it shattered into pieces.

In the blink of an eye, the blot staining the area was gone. It had been so black, so thick, so heavy even in the air, and yet suddenly there was not so much as a drop of that sinister liquid in sight. The stagnant air cleared, and the evening sun burned beautifully, its brilliant orange bathing the thoroughly destroyed Heartslabyul garden. Only the memory of the intense battle remained.

“Riddle ... please!” Trey wrapped his hands around Riddle’s, as if in prayer. And then they heard a quiet groan.

“Unh ...”

“Riddle?!”

“Thank goodness. Is he awake?!” Cater asked.

Riddle opened his eyes, and Deuce slumped weakly to the ground.

“You okay?” Yuya asked with a concerned frown.

“I’m just relieved,” Deuce said, smiling faintly. Ace also hung his head and let out a deep breath.

“I ...” Riddle began as he sat up.

“Tch!” Ace clicked his tongue at him and said heatedly, “So you finally came to your senses? Geez, man, do you even know what happened here?! Someone gets a *teensy* bit mad at you, and you go on a total rampage. I mean, how spoiled *are* you? Seriously.” Perhaps due to his immense relief, the words Ace spat out were merciless. When he saw Riddle staring at him blankly, he grew even more peeved. “Hey, I’m talking to you! The garden’s all torn up—not to mention that we could’ve died! You really—”

“The truth is, I ...” Riddle said softly. “I really wanted to eat the chestnut tart.”

“Huh?” Ace’s eyes widened at the sudden confession. The same confused look appeared on the faces of Trey, Cater, and everyone else around them.

With lips still drained of blood, Riddle continued to speak his mind, as if delirious. “I don’t care if the roses are white or the flamingos are pink. And I prefer honey to sugar cubes in my tea, and I like milk tea better than lemon tea, anyhow. And, after dinner, I want to be the one sitting around talking with everyone ...”

Riddle’s voice gradually grew muddier until it was unintelligible. His big eyes were wet with tears. Droplets caught on his lower lashes, just

barely stopping along the edge of his eyes. "I always, always wanted to play with you and Chenya, Trey. I really wanted ... with everyone ... I ... Aaaaah!" he howled.

"Riddle ..." Trey said softly, and the floodgates finally opened. Riddle burst into tears.

This was no half-hearted weeping. Tears poured down his cheeks, snot hung from his nose, and his chest heaved with choking sobs. Without even the wherewithal to hide his face, he turned his head up at the sky and wailed.

"No way. Riddle Rosehearts ... crying like a baby." Cater gaped at the unexpected sight.

"Myah! Geez. You're busting my eardrums," Grim growled.

"What the—? Am I the baddie?" Ace mused and pursed his lips in a pout. "You think a few crocodile tears is all it'll take for me to forgive you?"

"Give the guy a break, Ace," Deuce said, rolling his eyes.

Trey rubbed Riddle's shaking back. "Riddle, I'm sorry, too. I knew you were struggling, and all I did was pretend not to notice. But that was no good. I get that now," he apologized.

Trey's face was serious as he grabbed hold of Riddle's shoulders, his hands determined and powerful. That he was making a real effort to be open and honest with the boy before him was painfully clear. His gaze was kind yet severe, roving to those who were watching.

"I'm gonna say what I should have said earlier," Trey continued. "Your way of doing things is wrong, and you owe everyone an apology."

"I'm sorry," Riddle said, hiccupping. His face crumpled up, and he sobbed, "I'm so sorry! I'm s-sorry ... ! I'm really sorry!"

Stunned, Deuce threw up his hands, exclaiming, "To think that the housewarden would bow his head like this to us ..."

"Myah!" Grim sniffed indignantly. "So long as he gets it."

"Yes, that," Cater said with a soft smile. "And it's not just Riddle. We all get it now, truly."

"Housewarden." Ace's voice was quiet as he addressed the sobbing Riddle. "I know I've been saying I wanted an apology from you, but now that I got one, you know what?"

Riddle lifted a damp face. "What?"

With a smile still on his face, Ace took a deep breath. “One stupid ‘I’m sorry’ doesn’t even come close to making up for what you did!” he barked, his face coloring with anger. “I will nnnnnnnnever forgive you!”

“Dude?!” Cater’s face tightened. “Way to be a capital-J jerk!”

“And proud of it!” Ace clenched his hands into tight fists. “Have you forgotten how he made a total fool outta me? Have you forgotten how he just threw away that chestnut tart we worked so hard on? That ain’t something you can make go away with a few tears and a flimsy ‘I’m sorry’!”

“Wow. I ain’t never met anyone better at holdin’ grudges than me,” Grim commented as he rolled his eyes alongside Cater and Deuce.

Even Yuya was exasperated. Despite the fact that he’d been battered and beaten, and basically dragged through a ditch, Ace was still raring for a fight?

“Ace.” Yuya’s voice was quiet. “You said that you’d forgive him if he apologized.”

“Shut it!” Ace snapped. “This guy owes me for real.”

“Then what do you want me to do ... ?” Riddle asked, baffled.

Ace crouched down before him and looked off to one side. “I don’t got a birthday coming up anytime soon, you know.”

“What are you talking about?” Trey asked, perplexed.

“I demand a do-over for the unbirthday party!” Ace declared, and the look of surprise on Yuya’s face matched Riddle’s. “This one was over before it began. We didn’t get to eat any of those tasty treats. So can we get a do-over?”

Riddle’s jaw hung open, and Ace glared at him. “Except this time, *you’re* the one who’ll bring the tart!” he demanded.

“Me?” Riddle said, and looked questioningly up at Trey like he didn’t understand what Ace was saying.

“And no getting Trey to make it for you,” Ace warned. “I know how Trey is. He’d totally bake the whole thing for you and treat you like a spoiled little prince. You gotta do the work yourself!” His eyebrows shot up on his forehead while his mouth slipped up at the corners. “Do that, and then things will be square between us. Okay? You got it?”

“Yeah. I got it.” Riddle nodded, but Ace remained as pouty as ever. He looked as though he were deliberately putting on an unhappy face for

show. He was maybe even blushing.

“Except you had lots of help making *your* tarts,” Cater noted snidely.

“So true. Takes the easy way out himself. He’s all talk,” Deuce replied.

Yuya laughed. They were totally right. The grumpy refusal to simply admit how he felt was very Ace.

The headmage cleared his throat. “While you no doubt have much to discuss, I am concerned about the effect of the overblot. Let us hurry to the nurse’s office.”

Crowley and Trey lifted Riddle to his feet and helped him out of the garden.

“Cater! What happened?!” yelled a Heartslabyul student.

“Where’s the housewarden? And the vice housewarden? Are they okay?!” called out another voice.

The dorm students started trickling back into the garden, pestering Cater for information.

“Peachy keen, kiddos! I’m sure our beloved housewarden’ll tell you aaaaall about it later,” he said and clapped his hands. “In the meantime, looks like we’ve got some cleaning up to do!”

“What? Do we have to do it today? I’m exhausted,” Ace said as he slumped down onto the ground. The lawn had been peeled back, exposing the dirt beneath, but his white dorm uniform was already filthy, so he probably didn’t care anymore.

“Nope! ♪ Our perfectly picturesque garden’s a total tire fire. And you *know* what the other dorms would say if we left it like this!”

The magestones of Ace and the others who’d helped to stop Riddle were already starting to turn black and powerless, so they were forced to manually clean up while the returning students used magic to carefully replant the scattered rose bushes and restore the chaos of the garden to its usual beautiful state.

“The bushes might just die on us anyway,” Cater sighed. “But we’ll feel better now that they’re where they belong.”

They couldn’t put the roses back, though, so the end result was a sad shadow of the original garden, with no red to punctuate the green, and even the green was a bit on the sparse side. Nevertheless, Cater looked satisfied as he took a picture with his phone.

“Grim?” Yuya called, looking around. Grim had been lazing next to him, not doing much of anything, but now he was nowhere to be seen. Yuya walked around looking for him and eventually found the monster crouched down beneath a rose bush, digging up the soft dirt they had only just put back.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “We just filled that hole.”

“Something’s smellin’ *real* good right here.” He held up a muddy paw. “Got it!”

Yuya gasped when he saw the round stone nestled in those paw pads. “You found one of those on the ground at the Enchanted Mine, too!”

The stone was so strangely black that Yuya could still see it despite how dark it was now that the sun had set. It looked almost identical to the stone Grim had eaten at the Enchanted Mine. Deuce and Ace peered at it from either side.

“You’re right.” Deuce frowned. “Wonder where it came from?”

“Just don’t put it in your mouth this time,” Ace told the small monster. “Last time, we were really—hey!”

“Down the hatch!” Grim tossed the stone into his mouth, ignoring Ace’s attempt to stop him.

Cater’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “Oh, Grimmy, have some self-respect! That was literally trash.”

“Grim, you should really spit that out,” Yuya said as he tried to grab him, but Grim danced away, the fur on his tail standing up.

“Aaaah.” He licked his chops with an ecstatic look on his face, as if lost in a dream. He was completely taken over by the flavor of the stone. “Rich and sweet, but with a complex hint of bitterness in the aftertaste. Equally delicious, but with quite a different mouthfeel than that last one I ate.”

“I guess this is just a thing now?” Yuya raised concerned eyebrows. “Should we try and get him to stop, though?”

“Well, he *is* a monster. Maybe it’s okay?” Ace guessed as he smiled indulgently at the overjoyed Grim. “He was bouncing around last time, too. Guess his stomach’s made different from ours.”

“Mmm!” Grim rubbed his belly. “I just tried the grass, and the flavor was surprisingly pleasant! Crisp, even! Perfect palate cleanser.”

“Hey! Don’t eat that!” Deuce grabbed Grim around his middle and started pulling. “We *just* put that grass back!”

But Grim was intent on nibbling the grass and refused to budge. Maybe he was really hungry. Ace joined Deuce and tugged on Grim, and the soft leaves of the rose bushes rustled.

Cater watched with a smile and snapped a picture of the group on his phone. The gentle downturn of his eyes seemed more peaceful than usual. “Thanks, guys,” he murmured.

Ace and the others appeared not to hear him.

Yuya now understood that staying quiet and watching people was one option that should be respected. Which was exactly why that act also carried responsibility. Cater always had a kind look on his face, but he wasn’t a mere observer—he was one of the people shaping Heartslybyul. He probably knew that himself. And as one of the people who had turned a blind eye to Riddle’s tyranny, he might face some tough questions going forward. But as Yuya looked at him, Cater’s face brightened into a smile, as if to say mere details like that didn’t matter.

He was glad that Cater could speak up now and that they were all okay. He was glad Ace had gotten the collar off. He was glad Deuce could laugh now. He was glad that he had realized in that moment exactly what it was he wanted to do. A sense of accomplishment he’d never felt before filled his heart.



“SO DID YOU MAKE UP in the end?” Yuya asked.

“Make up?!” Ace erupted in laughter. “We’re not babies. There’s gotta be a better way of putting it.”

Yuya frowned. He didn’t actually know how else to ask the question.

It had been two weeks since Riddle had overblotted at Heartslabyul. During that time, Yuya and the others had talked occasionally during breaks or after school, but they hadn’t hung out much more than that. But that morning, Ace and Deuce had abruptly come knocking at Ramshackle Dorm’s door, declaring, “Now that everything’s settled down ...”

It was pretty early on a Sunday, so Grim was still sleeping. Despite the hour, both boys were in their dorm uniforms and looking quite formal. The fact that they had made a point of coming over to report on recent events no doubt meant that there had been some kind of watershed.

“Mm. Last night, they called all the dorm students together, and the housewarden,” Deuce said from where he sat on the sofa, and then bent abruptly at the waist, his head almost touching his knees. “Riddle said, ‘I was wrong to do the things I did. My apologies.’ He bowed so deeply—it was pretty real.”

“Yeah,” Ace agreed. “But even still, it’s not like everyone’s just gonna be all, oh, sure, all is forgiven, y’know?”

“Huh?” Yuya said, surprised. “Even though Riddle apologized so sincerely?”

“Well, yeah. Duh.” Ace snorted. “The upperclassmen, especially, they had to live that wild life for a whole year. They must be holding super serious grudges. Riddle’s all apologies now, but with that personality, it’s only natural he’d have some enemies both inside and outside the dorm.”

“Those guys who only complained about him behind his back, though, instead of actually talking to him ... I’m not so sure about them.” Deuce had a complicated look on his face, but Ace was indifferent.

“Whatevs! They all suck!” he declared.

Practical Ace and compassionate Deuce. Their different personalities were displayed in their reactions to reality. It wasn’t a matter of one or the other being right.

Deuce’s face remained clouded. “But he went all the way to overblotting. I think the housewarden’s got his own things going on. Clover won’t tell us any details, though.”

In most cases, there was no difference in the amount of blot each mage could accumulate. Thus, the more powerful the magic, the higher the risk of blot buildup. But an excellent mage like Riddle would naturally have known that. So how had he ended up in that situation?

There was, in fact, a trigger that supposedly made overblot more likely to occur. And that was the mage’s mental state. When a magic user held on to negative emotions such as anger, sadness, or confusion, the amount of blot increased dramatically. As a result, there was a greater risk of overblot.

The headmage had later explained to Yuya and the others that the creature behind Riddle was the fusion of those negative emotions and blot. It seemed like their choice to separate the creature from Riddle had been the right one.

When they returned to Ramshackle Dorm that day, there was a black stain in Grim’s magestone. But the headmage had been right when he told them the blot would disappear once Grim was properly rested; the magestone was now back to its original, lovely lilac color. Yuya peeked at Grim as he lay asleep on his back, and the monster rolled over grumpily as if sensing Yuya’s gaze on his chest.

Yuya had no idea how much sadness and anger Riddle had to have been carrying around to fill both that clear stone and his own body with blot to the point of overflowing.

“So what?” Ace asked, arching an eyebrow. “You feel bad about beating the snot out of the housewarden?”

“As if,” Deuce said. “Given the state he was in, there was no way I was gonna listen to a single word out of his mouth. If that guy wants to be my leader, he needs to prove his worth to me.”

Yuya nodded. “I don’t feel bad about it either.”

“Well, of course *you* don’t.” Ace grinned at him. It was the same clever smile as always.

“Huh?” Yuya stared at him blankly.

“I know you meant it for real, all that stuff about hating fighting, Yu, but ...” Ace shrugged. “It’s like, you’re actually just really stubborn.”

Stubborn? Yuya was at a loss for words. No one had ever called him “stubborn” before. “That’s ...” He wanted to explain himself, but he couldn’t find the right words.

“I mean, most people are not gonna stand up in a situation like that and tell a guy who’s totally flipping his lid to ‘stop fighting,’ y’know?” Ace laughed. “Even Cater couldn’t do anything, and he was for real trying to put on the brakes.”

“True. Yu’s been pretty opinionated since the Enchanted Mine.” Deuce laughed, too, and Yuya was stunned. Opinionated? *Him?*

He’d always hated fighting with people, so he’d avoided all kinds of things. He wouldn’t even take up a hobby or make friends. But was it really just that?

What if it’s not that I wouldn’t make friends, but I couldn’t?

He hated stirring things up because of relationships; he’d spent his life avoiding conflict. But that way of living also hadn’t allowed him to make friends. He felt like he understood that now, after seeing what had happened with Riddle. *Maybe I hated bending my own principles more than I wanted to have friends.*

But then didn’t that make him a much more self-centered person that he’d thought?

Yuya groaned, and Ace patted his shoulder.

“Well, it’s way better than some cringey sense of justice or whatever,” Ace said. “And a guy who says he did it for his own sake’s a lot more believable than someone saying it was for my sake.”

“But I really did want to—” Yuya began.

“Yeah, yeah. Got it. All good.” Ace waved a dismissive hand to say they were done talking about it.

Yuya turned to Deuce. He was looking at Ace out of the corner of his eye and smiling. He shrugged as if to tell Yuya not to worry about it. “He’s just embarrassed,” Deuce said. “Ace’s basically always gotta be a little contrarian.”

“Shut your trap,” Ace said.

Objectively, it hadn’t been that long since Yuya had met Ace and Deuce, and he wasn’t sure if it was okay to call them friends yet. Maybe they wouldn’t like it if he did. But this was the first time he’d wanted to be there for anyone. That at least seemed to have come through loud and clear.

Ace cleared his throat. “Anyway, Yu. You got plans after this?”

“After this?” Yuya asked. He looked at the Ramshackle Dorm clock. It wasn’t even eight yet. “I’m not sure at what time, but I was thinking of going and studying in the library.”

In order to keep up with his lessons, he’d been busy every day with prepping and reviewing. Professor Crewel had handed him a reference book the day before yesterday and told him to read it over the weekend. But he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to be able to read it without a dictionary, even though it had been written for middle schoolers. He also hadn’t finished the books that Mr. Trein had lent him, and he wasn’t finished with Mr. Vargas’s daily training, either. Even though he was overwhelmed with homework every day, he felt like he was actually accomplishing things.

“So then you’ve got no plans. Okay,” Ace said, and stood up.

“Why are you asking?” Yuya followed him with his eyes.

“Unbirthday party. We’re having one today.”

Grim’s ears twitched. “Party ... Food ... ?”

“Yup! And a present from Cater.”

“Present?!” Grim sprang up, and Ace grinned.

“Wow. Mercenary.”

“But today, I mean, it’s so sudden,” Yuya said. “Why out of the blue?”

“We’d actually been talking about having one when Housewarden Rosehearts was back up to full speed. But we decided to keep it a secret from you until everything was ready.”

“Ready? For the party?” he asked, and Deuce smiled as he stuck his hand into his jacket. Ace also smiled like he was up to something.

“Here,” Deuce said. “Put these on, and then let’s head over to the unbirthday party.”

When they saw what was in his hands, both Yuya’s and Grim’s eyes grew round as saucers.

When he arrived at Heartslabyul, he noticed the hedges were all different heights. Apparently, they had switched out the bushes that hadn’t taken root and were in the middle of getting them sorted out. The rose bushes still had no buds on them, and there was none of the entrancing fragrance of before. Only the green leaves were vibrant and brimming with life. If the students of Heartslabyul combined their powers, they would surely be able to make this dorm bloom again soon. Fortunately, the garden was nevertheless still beautiful.

“Getting the garden back into some kind of shape was a whole thing. But when it’s that battered, you kinda have to just throw your hands up.” Ace laughed.

“Morning!” Cater came trotting over to them. “Yuey, so good to see you!”

“Oh, Cater! Thank you so much for the present,” Yuya said, pointing at his own chest.

What Ace and Deuce had given him was a ribbon the size of his palm, split equally between red and black. In the center, a brooch glittered in the shape of a heart with a crown. It was quite lovely and very obviously designed for Heartslabyul Dorm.

Yuya pinned it to the jacket like a corsage, and instantly, his all-black uniform felt fancy.

“Looks super great on you! So?” Cater waggled his eyebrows at him. “Pretty cute, huh? My finest work! ♪”

“Yes, I’m really happy with it.” Yuya nodded. “Grim was pretty delighted, too.”

In place of his original striped ribbon, Grim had slipped this ribbon through his magestone, tied it in a bow at the back of his neck, and affixed the heart brooch there.

Cater was quickly snapping pictures of them smiling in their matching ribbons.

“Myah ha ha! Now I got more outfits. I’m the coolest!” Grim crowed.

“Mm-hmm! You look great, too, Grimmy!” Cater said.

“O’course! I’m a great mage, so I can set any look on fire!” Grim waved his head around, showing off his ribbon. He’d been preening like this the whole way here from Ramshackle Dorm, delighted at his new, enhanced wardrobe. When Yuya thanked Cater again on Grim’s behalf, Cater’s smile grew wider.

“With the crown on there, it feels kinda special, yeah? I wanted to make it so you guys could have some kind of formal dress, too, since we were gonna ask you to the unbirthday party and everything, so I talked it over with Riddle.”

“What?!” Yuya gasped. “Riddle? What’d he say?”

Cater snapped his fingers at Yuya. “He said ‘That would be good’ right away. Plus, he told me how amaaaazing my taste is! ♪”

Yuya had never dreamed it was a Riddle-approved present. Perhaps Ace and Deuce hadn’t known either; surprise colored their expressions.

At that moment, someone raced out from the end of the garden and shouted over the chatter of the party, “All hail our leader, the red sovereign himself!”

A white rabbit person standing next to a large arch blew a trumpet, and everyone naturally stood to attention.

“Housewarden Riddle!” came the chorus of the students. “We salute you, Housewarden Riddle!”

Riddle and Trey appeared to cheers and applause. Riddle looked a little thinner than he had before, but his feet were steady under him, and it looked like he really had recovered.

But whereas before he had been so puffed up and full of himself, today he seemed a little anxious. He glanced over at the tables, not particularly concerned about the eyes of the students focused on him.

“Is he maybe worried about whether or not we followed the Queen of Hearts’ rules putting the party together?” Deuce murmured.

Ace scowled dramatically. “Tch. Is he *still* going on about that stuff?”

“Simmer down, boys. He’s not going to do a complete one-eighty on who he is,” said Cater, patting their shoulders. “But he didn’t freak when he discovered the unpainted roses this morning. Not only that, he even helped me to finish painting them. Sure, the way he gets a teensy bit *too* strict is a problem, but the way he so diligently crosses his t’s and dots his i’s is one of Riddle’s charms. I know that, and so does everyone else. He can take his time with the whole changing thing.”

Was Trey saying the same thing? After he whispered something in Riddle’s ear, Riddle smiled in relief.

“Okay!” Cater grabbed a glass and held it up in the air. He probably thought that nothing would get started unless someone took control. “How about we get this party started?”

Riddle swallowed hard. “Happy unbirthday!” he said. He sounded slightly nervous, but his voice carried as well as ever.

The sound of glasses clinking rang throughout the garden.

“Happy unbirthday!” the students called back. “Happy unbirthday!”

Voices of celebration echoed under the blue sky. No one was forcing the students to cheer and celebrate; their actions were from the heart now. The cheer in their voices emphasized the smiles on their faces.

Ace, Deuce, and Yuya pried Grim away from the table where he was inhaling food, and together, the group approached Riddle.

“Yu, Grim,” Riddle said with a smile. “You came.”

“Yes. Um ...” Yu paused.

Should he thank him? Offer congratulations? Or maybe he should say “Get well soon”? Not knowing how to continue, Yuya looked to Grim for help, but he was busy eating cake at Yuya’s feet. Yuya had never dreamed Grim would ignore Riddle and keep eating.

“Excuse him.” He tried to stop the monster, and Riddle sighed.

“Don’t shovel it into your face like that,” Riddle said, and then went around behind Grim and crouched down. “There we go. Your whole look would be ruined if your ribbon got all twisted up.”

“Thank you,” Yuya said.

Beside him, Deuce groaned, “The housewarden fixing Grim’s ribbon?” He couldn’t contain his shock. Yuya was also surprised Riddle would go out of his way to kneel down for Grim’s sake. The fact that Grim himself

paid this absolutely no mind made Riddle's methodicalness that much funnier.

"What happened to that tart, Housewarden?" Ace asked, and Riddle looked visibly nervous.

"I made it for you, as I promised I would. There: one strawberry tart, crafted by yours truly," he said, pointing to a small tart on the table. Among the many cakes with fruits and cream in the shape of flowers, this one had a simple design, with nothing but strawberries on top. Bits were missing from the edge of the crust, perhaps because it had been a little overcooked.

But Trey stared at it happily and nodded to himself. "Nice!" he said encouragingly. "The shape's a little off, but I can tell you put a lot of work into that glaze. A fine job indeed, especially considering it was your first!"

"Oh, puh-leeze. How about we actually *try* it before you start fawning all over him, Trey?" Ace said, then pursed his lips into a pout as he picked up a plate. Riddle took one of the perfectly equivalent eight slices and set it onto the plate before handing out the rest of the slices.

"Mkay." Ace twirled a fork in one hand. "How about we taste test the housewarden's apology tart?"

They all took a bite at the same time, with Riddle anxiously watching.

"Hm?!" Ace screwed up his face, and half-shouted, half-spat, "Salty!"

Riddle's eyes flew open. "What?!"

Trey, Cater, Deuce, and Grim all had the same reaction as Ace. Indeed, the tart was so salty that Yuya unconsciously coughed. The saltiness of the cream was so strong that it wiped out the sweet bitterness of the strawberries and the sweetness of the tart crust.

"Whoa, what even gives?! This isn't *kinda* salty—it's a full-on salt lick!" Ace took a drink of water and pressed in on Riddle. "Hey, is this some kind of revenge?!"

"O-of course not! I followed the recipe exactly."

"Maybe you got the sugar and salt mixed up?" Deuce suggested, and Riddle sniffed in indignation.

"I would *never* make such an error. I confirmed the recipe requirements three times with the point-and-call system. I also double-checked the ingredients while working. It should have come out perfectly, with absolutely no mistakes."

“Okay, too many steps,” Deuce laughed, and Cater joined him.

“How very Riddle of you!”

But Trey cocked his head to one side, his face serious. “So then what happened? Nothing in the recipe I gave you would make the tart salty.”

“Oh! Could it be ...” Riddle said, placing a hand on his jaw. “Maybe I put in too much oyster sauce.”

“Huh?” Trey’s eyes widened, and the group jolted with surprise.

“Curious,” Riddle said. “Trey, you told me ages ago that although it wasn’t written in the recipe, the secret to a delicious tart was to add oyster sauce. That was very unexpected. I remember it well, so I did just as you said and added the oyster sauce.” He seemed proud of himself as he related this to them, but perhaps noticing Trey’s gaping jaw and Ace’s mocking gaze, the look on his face slowly changed. “Why are you all looking at me like that ... It can’t be ...”

“Why would anyone use oyster sauce?! Trey was teasing you, you big dodo!” Ace jabbed at him with his fork, conveniently overlooking the fact that he’d also been taken in by that same joke. “I mean, think about it for two seconds, dude!”

“I ...” Riddle turned reproachful eyes on Trey, but then started in surprise.

Trey was biting his lip, a strange look on his face, half-hunched over. “I can’t believe someone actually fell for the ol’ oyster sauce prank ... Hee hee hee ...” He desperately bit back his laughter, but his efforts were in vain. His shoulders kept shaking, until finally his glee burst free of his lips. “And that it would be you of all people, Riddle! Ha! Sorry, I shouldn’t laugh. But ... Ha ha! I’m sorry, it’s just so funny ... Ha ha ha!”

Yuya noticed concern cross Cater’s face as Trey doubled over.

“Haah,” Riddle expelled a soft breath. “Yes. Quite humorous indeed. I truly am a fool. Ha ha ha!”

When Riddle laughed, the floodgates burst open, and soon they were all exploding in laughter. With the tension gone from Riddle’s smiling face, he looked so innocent and much younger than Yuya.

“I’ve never had such an awful tart before,” Ace said.

“So true,” Yuya agreed.

“Hey,” Grim said tugging on his trousers. “If you’re not gonna eat that, let me have it.”

“Huh? You still have room for more?” Yuya remembered the fact that the maker of the tart was right there and swallowed the words “But there are other cakes” just as they were on the tip of his tongue. Given that Grim ate rocks and grass, Yuya shouldn’t have been surprised that he was not particularly bothered by trivial differences between sweet and salty.

“You know, in its own weird way, I think it’s actually kinda good!” Grim declared.

“Right?” Cater said. “I maybe get where you’re coming from, Grimmy. It really isn’t half as bad as you’d think.”

“Seriously? You’re agreeing with Grim?” Ace frowned. “Oh, I get it. You’re doing it again, Cater, tiptoeing around the housewarden—”

“Is it because the tart’s not sweet?” Trey interrupted.

Ace and Deuce looked back at him. “Huh?”

With a meaningful smile, Trey said to a baffled Cater, “I mean, you hate sweet things, so.”

“You noticed?” Cater mumbled, eyes darting around nervously. “But how’d you figure it out? I’ve never told anyone that.”

“Because you casually bring up my Paint the Roses spell every time we eat sweets,” Trey explained. “You hide it well, but that was a giveaway. I figured you were just being careful not to rain on everyone’s parade. But you don’t have to do that anymore, okay?”

“Oh, I ... I tried so hard ... Aaah, darn it. You mean I’m totally busted? Cringe!” Cater covered his face and glared at Trey through his fingers. “So, like, Trey? I think this habit of yours of thinking things and not saying them is kind of bad, maybe?” He didn’t look like he was seriously angry. As he himself had said, he was mostly just embarrassed.

Trey simply smiled. “I’ll make you a quiche for the next unbirthday party.”

“Please and thank you.” Cater fanned his red cheeks with a hand. “Make sure it’s as Magicam-worthy as any cake.”

“Don’t worry. He’s sure to whip up something tasty,” an unfamiliar voice said suddenly.

Yuya looked to one side to find a head with cat ears bobbing in the air.

“Your baked goods are always so delightful, Trey,” Chenya said, cheeks bulging.

“Chenya?!” Riddle did a double take before exclaiming, “What are you doing here?”

“A head?!” Cater and the other dorm students nearby exclaimed in shock, but Chenya paid them no mind as he slowly materialized a body. Yuya had no idea how he had managed to eat when he was just a head, but he could see several cakes nearby with pieces missing.

“Hm? I came to celebrate my unbirthday with all of you. A very merry unbirthday to you, Riddle,” Chenya said.

“The unbirthday party is a Heartslabyul tradition,” Riddle said, a stern look on his face. “It does not pertain to outsiders—especially not you as a student at Royal Sword Academy.”

“Royal Sword Academy?!” Ace and Deuce cried out as one.

“Royal Sword Academy? What’s that?” Yuya asked, but for some reason, the two of them set down their plates and forks with hard looks on their faces.

“Why didn’t you say so before?” Ace demanded of Chenya. He crossed his arms. “And just when I was feeling a teensy bit grateful that there was at least one nice guy at our school. I feel lied to.”

Chenya raised a dubious eyebrow. “You were the one who said you didn’t care about introductions.”

“That’s ...” Ace sighed. “Okay, maybe that’s true. But I never imagined there’d be someone from Royal Sword Academy at our school.”

Yuya wondered what all of this was about, and Trey filled him in with a smile, saying, “Royal Sword Academy is Night Raven College’s rival school.”

“Its rival?” Yuya asked. “It’s an arcane academy, too?”

“Mm-hmm.” Trey nodded. “Said to be just as prestigious as ours. We compete over just about everything at tournaments, contests, challenges, you name it. But ...”

“But?” Yuya waited for him to continue.

Riddle picked up where he left off, with a sour look on his face, admitting, “Night Raven College has lost to them for a hundred years straight.”

“So then, you’re not so much rivals as ...” Yuya swallowed the words, and Riddle clenched his fists in frustration.

It made sense that the whole school would view this archenemy with hostility, given the hundred-year losing streak. The instant they heard that Chenya was a student at Royal Sword Academy, the gazes of the students around Ace and Deuce changed.

“Royal Sword Academy? He’s one of those pompous jerk faces?!” muttered one student.

“He’s got some nerve sneaking in here. We gotta run him outta here!” another shouted.

Chenya grinned and said, “Well, now that I’ve tasted some tart, perhaps I should see myself out. Once again, happy unbirthday, everyone! Hm hm hmm hmm! ♪”

Humming once again, he gradually faded out of sight, until only his smile lingered in the air.

“Where’d he go?!” The students began to yell and race around, looking for the invisible cat boy.

The headmage had told Yuya he still hadn’t found a way to get him back to his original world. He’d finally gotten used to ghosts being the first thing he saw when he woke up. And the days he’d spent with Grim, Ace, Deuce, and everyone else were not as bad as he’d feared they might be at first. But it really didn’t seem like he could make it in a place with this much fighting.

“You’re gonna catch it when we find you!” Ace huffed, scanning the area for Chenya, and Yuya felt a new resolve to try to get back to his own world.





GRIM STAGGERED OUT of the Heartslabyul mirror, stomach blissfully stuffed. He'd gotten his fill of the leftover cake thanks to his assignment to the cleanup crew. His hench-human was no doubt patiently awaiting his return at Ramshackle Dorm. He had to hurry back. Who knew what kind of trouble that magicless human would get himself dragged into if left alone for too long?

"But my tum-tum's mighty full ..." he mused. His stomach was too heavy walking on two legs. When he dropped down to all fours and shook himself out, his tail knocked against something. "Hmm?"

When he looked back, a boy with large, triangular ears was standing at the entrance to the Hall of Mirrors. Apparently, Grim had bumped into him.

"Oh, lookee. A big, fat kitty cat," the boy said as he sniffed at him and licked his lips. "Mmm, and he smells *delicious*."

"W-w-what are you ..." Grim was overawed by the boy inching toward him. He'd thought he was the king when it came to gluttony, but this guy did not look like he was joking when he said Grim looked delicious. The skinny boy's eyes shone eagerly as he came closer and closer.

"I-I'm not tasty at all! If you're gonna eat someone ... Right! Start with Ace or Deuce!" He started running as fast as he could toward Ramshackle Dorm. He looked back halfway, but there was no sign of the boy chasing after him.



Returning to Savanaclaw Dorm, Ruggie headed for the housewarden's room to report on his investigation. He knocked but got no reply. As usual. When he went inside anyway, Leona was lounging on a large sofa, reading a book. Clothes and a bag were scattered on the floor where he'd tossed them down.

"Aw," Ruggie sighed as he picked the items up and set them in a corner. "I ran into that monster—you know the one? Outta control at the orientation? Anyway, he was deffo on his way home from the Heartslabyul party. He stank of sugar. How come Savanaclaw doesn't have any traditions that involve eating lots of free food?"

"Bah, it's a beautifully sunny day, and they're stuffing their faces with cookies and cake? Grossin' me out over here," Leona replied coldly, and then looked up at Ruggie for the first time. "Anyway."

Ruggie didn't let him finish his sentence. "Just leave it to me, boss. All the preparations are proceeding smoothly. Shyeheehee!" He laughed, shoulders shaking, and Leona smiled, too, as if compelled to by that unique laugh.

"Then those fools won't be happily guzzling tea for much longer. That goes double for that snob Malleus." Leona's smile turned icy, in a way that made even Ruggie shudder and want to take a step back. "They got no idea what's comin' ..."



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